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GLAMOUR.

GLAMOUR.

A Novel.

BY

WANDERER,

AUTHOR OF 'FAIR DIANA,' 'ACROSS COUNTRY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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GLAMOUR.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRANGE VISITOR IN LOMBARD STREET.

THE bright dawn of the glorious June morning lighted up Ronald's haggard face as he stumbled wearily out of the train, and sought a few hours' rest at his hotel. It crept through the shutters of the little house near Park Lane where the anxious wife was watching and waiting. With its rosy rays it made her feel ashamed of her suspicions. Why should she do Ronald the injustice to suppose that he was deceiving her? It was a cruel insult to him! He might be impulsive,

but was incapable of a cold-blooded scheme of desertion. To Edith the morning light seemed full of hope. It was shining into a large house, not a quarter of a mile off, where Lady Redbourne's maid was unclasping her diamonds. She had spent several hours in what is called society, talking, dancing, and drinking the intoxicating cup of flattery almost to its very dregs. But she was not weary. On this morning a peculiar brightness shone from her dark eyes, her usually pale cheeks were flushed, and her bosom rose and fell with an unusual agitation. She seemed happy and full of life, and in a brisk voice told her maid to wake her at eight o'clock—an order which that elegant lady could not at first understand, for her mistress was not an early riser under any circumstances, and after a late night seldom rose till noon.

At Wimbledon the dawn found old Edward Woodall tossing uneasily on his bed, starting up from dreams of disgrace and the Bankruptcy Court. For a searching

examination of his position, which he had carried out on the previous evening, showed that Ronald was correct in his diagnosis, and that unless a hundred thousand pounds were found within the next twenty-four hours, or confidence was entirely restored, the Bank must close its doors. Beyond his wife's comfortable settlement, which had for years been in the hands of trustees, Mr. Woodall had but a moderate amount of property that he could at once realize, and he knew that his brother was in the same position. What he could scrape together would of course be made available at once, but he had deducted this sum before estimating the deficit at a possible hundred thousand. If it had not been for Ronald's caution during the past few months, a quarter of a million would not have sufficed to meet all engagements at a day's notice. The credit of a bank is its life-blood; none, however strong, can withstand a sudden and entire withdrawal of confidence. It operates like the

stoppage of the pulsations of the heart upon the human body. Life depends on it entirely. Would Ronald succeed in obtaining help in the North, and would he, Edward Woodall, succeed in restoring confidence in the City? He was obliged to doubt both. The sum required was too large for the one, and the panic seemed too universal for the other. The alternative was terrible to the old man, to whom the credit of the Bank was a religion. Of course the estate would 'cut up' well—they would pay twenty shillings in the pound without the slightest difficulty; but what a dreadful thing to have to close the old-established house, when they were not only solvent, but were probably in reality more flourishing than ever before!

Not once during that long night did Mr. Woodall think of blaming his unfortunate junior partner. Although the misfortunes which were likely to befall them were distinctly traceable to Ronald's imprudence,

no regret at his having joined the firm, no wish that he had never been born, crossed the senior's mind. On the contrary, he reflected with satisfaction, and not without gratitude, on the prudence, quickness, and caution which had characterized Ronald's business life, and when thinking of the possible future for all three after the Bank had finally closed its doors, felt more anxiety for the youth than for himself or for his brother. There were settlements which would enable the two older men to live in comfort, if not in affluence, but for Ronald it might be difficult to begin the world afresh. They had but one boy to look after between them—Ronald might have a large family to provide for. Grievously tortured as the poor man was with fear for the morrow, with anxiety for the preservation of his one idol—the credit of the Bank—yet was there no trace of bitterness in his soul against the cause of all the evil. Under Providence, he still hoped for the best from his own exertions and those of his partners

—for of course Mr. Woodall at Portino had been apprised of the state of affairs by a telegram in cipher, and had already replied that he would do his best, but had no hopes of sufficient assistance in Italy.

Mr. Woodall reached the Bank long before his accustomed time, hoping that the morning's post would bring some consolation. His letters, however, were most unsatisfactory; they contained numerous orders for remittances, but not a single important payment. Yesterday's distrust was evidently spreading, and must needs swamp them altogether unless something were done, and done soon. Before the doors of the Bank opened there was a crowd on the steps outside, a crowd which the poor old man watched with a sinking heart through the peep-hole in the shutter. There were clerks and messengers innumerable, evidently sent to draw out money and pay it in elsewhere. For people were not in such a

hurry to pay in as to come at a quarter to ten to wait in Lombard Street.

For a few minutes he debated whether he should take the shutters down at all—whether the Bank's doors should be opened. Would it not be wiser to pay no one, since it appeared probable—nay, almost certain—that they would be unable to pay every one? It would perhaps be better to adopt the usual course, and send at once for Messrs. Feather and Nest, the great accountants, and place the affairs of the Bank in their hands. But then the misfortune would be irremediable! Woodalls would have stopped payment; and even if they resumed their business the very next morning, the blot on the escutcheon would remain. Woodalls had stopped! No. Such a step must not be taken without the consent of all the partners. They would pay as long as there was money in the till, and a balance at the Bank of England. Sixteen thousand pounds would be available in half an hour

from the sale of his own securities—perhaps this would help them on till good news came from the North. But a telegram was despatched to Portino, conveying the dreadful news to Mr. John Woodall that if the run continued, they must close their doors before the day was out.

Then, having done all that could be done, the old man sat down to his desk, and ordered the doors to be opened to the eager crowd.

Calmly and steadily the clerks continued to weigh out sovereigns, to write down the numbers of bank-notes for five, ten, and fifty, and to pass them over the mahogany counter to the hands stretched out to receive them. Calmly and steadily the accountant continued to refer to his ledger to see whether the balances of the various customers were sufficient to meet the cheques presented. Calmly and steadily Mr. Radlet came in and presented to Mr. Woodall a draft for twenty thousand pounds on the

Bank of England, which must be sent round at once, so that the till might be replenished. And the senior partner signed his name to it as calmly as if it had been an everyday transaction—as if he had not known that there was little more behind that cheque—that when that also had gone, the knell of the Woodalls' Bank would sound.

Scarcely had Mr. Radlet closed the door of the *sanctum*, when there was another knock, and a clerk brought in a card.

‘The lady would like to see you at once, sir,’ said he, presenting it.

‘The lady?’

Mr. Woodall was surprised. He took up the card, and read on it—

LADY REDBOURNE,

193, *Grosvenor Square*.

‘Are you sure that she wants to see *me*?’ asked

Mr. Woodall, who at once thought of Ronald's escapade, and was naturally disinclined to discuss delicate matters with a lady at this moment.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the youth. ‘Her ladyship asked for Mr. Lascelles; and when we told her he was out of town, she said she wished to see the senior partner on urgent private business.’

‘Show her in,’ said Mr. Woodall, after a little hesitation. He rose to receive his visitor, but, though expecting to see a handsome and imposing person, could not resist a start of admiration and surprise when Lady Redbourne swept in. She was dressed in black silk, with a small bonnet of the same sombre hue. An atmosphere of the fashionable world, a breeze of beauty and refinement, seemed to follow her into the dingy Bank parlour. There was little colour in her finely chiselled face, lighted up only by the flashes of those marvellous eyes. ‘No wonder Ronald made an ass of himself!’ thought Mr. Woodall, as he

silently bowed and handed her a chair, himself standing to wait her pleasure.

‘Mr. Woodall, I understand?’ she said, bowing gracefully, and displaying a dazzling row of white teeth as she spoke. ‘I have come on business,’ she continued, seating herself. ‘I want your advice and help.’

‘Good heavens!’ thought Mr. Woodall, ‘the woman wants to borrow money! What a moment to choose!’ Aloud he said: ‘I am at your ladyship’s service.’

A faint colour rose to Lady Redbourne’s cheeks, and notwithstanding her knowledge of the world, she seemed to hesitate how to proceed.

Mr. Woodall was confirmed in his opinion, and wished her a thousand miles away. At that moment there was a knock at the door. It was a telegram. Hurriedly saying, ‘Excuse me, Lady Redbourne, important business!’ he tore it open. It was, as he

anticipated, from Ronald, who had not allowed the grass to grow under his feet. The contents were not encouraging. Translated into ordinary language, they stated that he had obtained only thirty thousand in Leeds, which being quite insufficient, he had accepted conditionally on finding more help at Manchester, where he was at once proceeding. This was the last straw. Mr. Woodall knew that the end would come long before Ronald had done anything in Manchester. But with an effort he turned to his visitor, and said, calmly enough, 'I beg your pardon, my lady. What can I do for you?'

Lady Redbourne had had time to collect her thoughts, and to decide on what she would say.

'You may be aware, Mr. Woodall, that I am pretty well off?'

'I know that his lordship is considered very wealthy,' answered Mr. Woodall.

'No; independently of my husband. I am my

own mistress entirely, and have the absolute disposal of my own money.'

Mr. Woodall bowed, wondering what she was driving at, but still fearing that all this was but a preface to a request for a loan.

'My name was Alma Monsell,' said Lady Redbourne. 'You may have heard it.'

'Indeed !' exclaimed the banker. 'Of course. I had the honour of knowing your father, Lady Redbourne. I was not aware that my old friend's daughter had married in England.'

'You see she did,' replied the lady, smiling ; 'and my father, who was for many years in business——'

Mr. Woodall nodded assent. 'He was an excellent customer to our Bank, too !'

'Left me the entire control of a very considerable sum of money.'

'I am glad to hear it, my lady,' said the banker.

'Now,' continued Lady Redbourne, 'I am often in

difficulties as to what I should do with this money. There is much more than I want. My husband is very well off, and spends but little; I spend a great deal, but not half my income.'

'Yours is a very unusual difficulty, Lady Redbourne. People generally know how to spend their money. But why not consult your banker, if you are merely looking for a good investment?'

'That is precisely the case. My banker is the Bank of England, and they do not give advice. I have bought a number of shares of various railways, and have laid out a good deal in safe securities, preference stock, and India stock, and that sort of thing, you know.'

'You have done very wisely, Lady Redbourne.'

'So I am told,' continued she, with increased assurance and heightened colour; 'but I have a good deal left, after providing an ample income for myself.'

'All the better: buy some more of the same sort,

my lady,' said the banker, whose fears were now allayed, but who was every moment expecting the announcement that there was no money left in the till.

'That is what I thought of; but knowing that my father acted a good deal by your advice, Mr. Woodall' (which was a deliberate falsehood, as her ladyship had only learnt five minutes before that the late Mr. Monsell had ever had a transaction with the Bank), 'I thought I would bring you the money, and ask you to lay it out to the best advantage for me.'

There! she had brought it out at last. But Mr. Woodall failed to understand.

'I could only purchase stock for you, Lady Redbourne; and that is what any broker would do just as well,' he replied.

'Oh no; that is not what I mean. I have brought the money, and you are to do just as you like with it,' she replied impulsively. 'Here it is.' And with these

words she opened a small purse, a miracle of gold filigree and ivory, and produced a slip of paper. 'I suppose,' she continued, carefully spreading out the paper, 'you will get me quite four per cent. That is more than I can obtain in first-class securities just now. I want this money to be used in the business, you know.'

Mr. Woodall took the paper which she held out to him. It was a draft on the Bank of England for £120,000. He stared at her vacantly. 'Do you know what you are doing, Lady Redbourne?' he gasped, after a minute's interval.

'Oh, yes!' she answered readily. 'I am bringing you a sum which I don't want, and asking you to take care of it for me. You may speculate with it; and I'm sure you will make a great deal more of it than I shall. Next Christmas let me know how much you have made out of it; and I suppose you will give me some of the profits. I shall not know how much I'm

going to get, and it will be a surprise—quite a pleasant Christmas-box, you know !’

‘ But supposing we lose it, Lady Redbourne ?’ stammered the banker, still scarcely believing the evidence of his eyes and ears.

‘ I told you that I had plenty more !’ replied Lady Redbourne, rising from her chair. ‘ It would not matter. But *you* won’t lose it, Mr. Woodall. I am not afraid of that. Many thanks. Good-bye.’

She held out her little hand, covered with a *gant de Suède* with ten buttons.

‘ Stop !’ cried Mr. Woodall, after a moment’s hesitation, for the temptation was indeed great : safety and honour together were being offered to him. ‘ I cannot take advantage of you in this way. You do not know all ; you have no idea of my position.’

‘ I know the Bank well enough, Mr. Woodall. I have absolute confidence in you and—and—in Mr. Lascelles.’

‘Lady Redbourne, you drive me to distraction! Do you know that I am ruined? In a quarter of an hour the Bank must close—must close for ever!’

‘Is this not enough, then, to save you?’ asked Lady Redbourne, turning quickly. ‘How much is it you want? Tell me at once!’

Mr. Woodall flushed scarlet, and then turned pale as a ghost, and sank back on his chair. ‘Then you knew all about it, Lady Redbourne?’ he stammered. ‘You know that we are on the verge of bankruptcy?’

‘Supposing I do,’ Lady Redbourne asked, ‘what then? Will this be enough to make you comfortable?’

‘Enough! Aye, more than enough! But I do not dare to take it. What claim have we on your ladyship, that you should come forward thus generously and save the old firm from destruction?’

‘Never mind claims. You did many kind things for my father in old times. Do not let any false

scruples stop you, Mr. Woodall. I know that the money is safe enough——’

‘Indeed, Lady Redbourne, if unceasing work and watchful care can save us and your money, they shall not be wanting,’ said the banker, whose power of resistance was gradually failing. ‘But, still, I do not like——’

‘Nonsense! I have made up my mind, and shall leave the cheque with you. Cash it. It will do you more good than me, Mr. Woodall.’

‘I do not know how to express our gratitude, Lady Redbourne——’

‘No thanks, please. I am glad to be of use. By-the-by, don’t let people in the City hear anything about this little transaction of ours. It is a matter between ourselves, you know. Good-bye.’

And with a graceful bow she swept out of the room. The rustle of her train made all the clerks in the Bank look up from their occupation. Even Mr. Radlet

forgot the imminent danger for a moment, and poked his grey head out of the glass screen which surrounded his desk. In another minute he heard the sharp little bell from Mr. Woodall's parlour, and he was summoned in.

'That means putting up the shutters,' he said to himself with a groan, as he tucked the cash-book under his arm, and climbed down the steps of his private desk. 'It's all been running out since yesterday morning, and nothing coming in. Oh dear! oh dear! that I should live to see the day when Woodalls' Bank had to stop payment!'

'Radlet,' said the senior partner, almost before the chief clerk had closed the door behind him, 'take this draft of the Burlington Gardens Branch to the Bank of England, and place it to our credit.'

The wizened, leathery face of the old man was suddenly lighted up as if with the glow of youth, when he took the slip of paper in his hand and

read the magic words: *Pay Messrs. Woodall, or order, one hundred and twenty thousand pounds.* Lady Redbourne had been as delicate as she was generous. The draft was signed by the manager and cashier of the Bank. Her name did not appear on the document.

‘Shall you want a cheque for the till?’ asked Mr. Woodall, enjoying his clerk’s surprise.

‘Where did you get it, sir? How is this?’ Radlet exclaimed, startled by joy out of all his propriety.

‘Never mind, Radlet,’ said Mr. Woodall, kindly placing his hand on the old man’s shoulder. ‘Help has come when least expected. Take it, and be grateful.’

‘Give me five thousand for the pay-clerks, sir, and that will be plenty. With such a horse in the stable, we can snap our fingers at the Stents and all of them.’

Mr. Radlet almost skipped out of the room, and

rushed to his hat, which he lifted off its peg with a joyous jerk. To the head accountant he just whispered 'All serene,' and bolted out of the Bank, and round the corner of Threadneedle Street, like a rabbit.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE JOURNEY NORTH.

It was nearly two o'clock on this eventful day when Ronald reached Manchester. The previous day's anxiety, a sleepless night, and a long morning spent in that most painful of all occupations—reminding people of favours conferred in past times in order to induce them to give immediate help now—had almost exhausted him. He felt as if he would rather sit down and let the inevitable blow fall on him than again begin that dreadful round of visits, telling his sad tale, and asking smug cotton-spinners and wealthy merchants for their assistance. So far he had met with a polite reception by all. He had had a series of confidential interviews in private offices—had been

listened to with deference, and even with sympathy. Nearly every one of his business friends had expressed a wish to help, if he could. But everything turned on that little *if*. They were all of them unaccountably tight, notwithstanding the general prosperity of trade. All had their money locked up, and were so largely involved themselves that they would be glad if they could get through the next three months safely. On their own showing, none of the firms had done any satisfactory business for some months, if not years. Mr. Edward Woodall was such an old friend, and the Bank had always been so straightforward and generous, that they would do anything in their power to help ; but, really, times were so bad that they could not, with justice to themselves, place any funds at his disposal just now.

There were two exceptions to this summary of the answers Ronald obtained. One was a comparatively small firm which had had dealings with the

Bank on a small scale for several years. They handed over a cheque for five thousand pounds—an enormous sum for them—with the simple remark, from the senior partner, that Mr. Edward Woodall had saved them from ruin in 186—, and it was only fair that they should do their best now. And another house, which exported large quantities of iron-work to Italy, was willing to trust Ronald with its acceptances to the extent of twenty-five thousand. He took the paper, promising not to make use of it unless he could cover the total he required among his friends at Manchester. Very little hope was there of such good fortune. The hours passed far too quickly, and even if he obtained what he wanted, the help might come too late. Very likely the Bank must stop before he could see the Manchester people. Ronald hurried into the big hotel opposite the station, not to waste time over luncheon, but just to see whether there was a telegram for him. It was quite possible that at this moment the shutters

were already up in Lombard Street, and the affairs of the Bank in the hands of the liquidators. He glanced over the wire-covered frame. Yes! there was a yellow envelope addressed to himself. Hastily tearing it open, he read as follows :

‘ Everything is satisfactorily arranged. No help in the North is necessary. Return at your convenience. You shall find a letter at home.’

A great weight fell from his heart. He felt as if he had suddenly grown a couple of inches taller. He could hold up his head again, and look the world in the face. But of course he did not understand how it had been done, and, with his usual tendency to ask himself questions which could not be answered, he immediately fell to unquiet cogitations as to how and where the money had been raised. But he did not forget to send grateful telegrams to Leeds, and to tell his two real friends that their kind assistance would not be wanted. Then the claims of hunger began to

assert themselves, and he was soon sitting comfortably at the best luncheon the hotel could afford, happier than, an hour before, he would have thought it possible to be. The time-tables showed that he could not reach town till eight o'clock, so he telegraphed to Edith to expect him at dinner, and, before the swift express had cleared Stockport, Ronald's weary eyes were closed in a dreamless sleep.

But the mind, less exhausted, though more excited, than the body, did not remain long at rest. Visions again troubled his slumber—visions which had no apparent connection with his waking thoughts of the previous day and night. There were strains of soft, seductive music, and glimpses of some bright ethereal space, all lighted by something less dazzling than the sun, and less garish than the gas-lights of earth. There appeared before him a confused mass of colour, of intermingled figures in graceful attitudes, of dark and fair faces, of maidens or angels coming and going.

Then they all seemed to melt into a mist, and from the mist stepped forth one clearly defined figure—a tall woman wearing long, dark robes, with a bright star, far brighter than any jewel, glistening in her raven hair. The apparition was stately, yet there was a sweet smile on her lips, and her black eyes flashed with a fire which was not of pride nor of disdain. Her features seemed well known to the dreamer, and in his vision he tried to identify them. But then they became indistinct, and he lost them again in the mist. Then the music ceased, and there emerged from the mist, close by the side of the beautiful figure which had enchanted him, another hideous one—a horrible fiend with huge misshapen limbs, a long, thin, cadaverous face, hairless scalp, great bony knotted hands, which the creature was rubbing over and over each other while making horrible grimaces. Grinning fearfully, the bogey approached Ronald and laid its

fearful hands on his throat. They closed on it like a vice, while the features became more and more like those of George Stent. There was the same large mouth, the same dropping jaw ; he recognised the fishy eyes, now fixed on his victim in a glassy stare. The sickly yellow skin stretched over the projecting cheek-bones, and was laid in huge folds on the narrow but apparently endless forehead. Ronald tried to shake him off, but his arms seemed paralyzed. Tighter and tighter those bony fingers held his throat, while a gleam of satisfaction, of fiendish joy, shot from those fish-like eyes. Another second, and he would be choked by the foul fiend. Then suddenly the beautiful apparition stood out clearly once more, and turned to him with the smile he knew well, and with a glance from those black eyes which seemed to promise relief and freedom, and more still. Her features were now clear enough ! how could he ever have forgotten that short straight nose, those

red lips curled in a graceful arch, that broad, low, clear forehead, those dark eyebrows, and the white temples, so transparent that the blue veins were seen beneath them. It was Alma Monsell; and she raised her hand, and even as he was suffocating in the grasp of the fiend, she touched the creature with the tips of her taper fingers. With a long shriek the monster released his grasp, and sank suddenly into a heap of dust. Ronald woke with a start. Alma Monsell, George Stent, the music, the mist—had all disappeared, but the shriek still sounded in his ears. It was the shrill whistle of the engine as the train drew up at Rugby platform.

He did not sleep again, but thought, and wondered, and pondered. This was the third time that the same beautiful vision had appeared to him, and between the last two dreams there had been the reality. He would have shut out the dream from his thoughts; but he could not drive from them the

remembrance of that Richmond evening. He had bitterly repented his folly, connected as it was with all the anxiety of the past week, and with poor Edith's generous and gentle conduct. He had reproached himself hundreds of times with his flirtation, and had called himself by every opprobrious epithet he could think of. And yet in his inmost soul there was a deep feeling which was not regret and not repentance. He did not acknowledge it. Nay, he repressed it with energy when it would force its way to the surface through all obstacles. It was an unholy feeling of joy, of exultation, of blissful recollection of that blissful kiss on the Richmond terrace and the drive home. He knew that it was wrong and wicked, and he drove it down again, and stamped upon it, and felt thoroughly ashamed of it, as treason to his gentle wife, as cowardly and utterly contemptible. But it came back nevertheless, and even as the train sped through the wide pastures of Northamptonshire his recreant thoughts

flew back to that vision of beauty which every better feeling told him must be driven for ever from his heart.

But, as he approached London, remorse and repentance, and struggles to conquer his rebellious temptations, alike disappeared before his curiosity as to the means whereby the Bank had been saved. Of course he thought that Mr. Woodall had found unexpected help among some of his old and tried friends. Perhaps one of the large financial institutions had come forward.

‘At any rate,’ said Ronald to himself, ‘there is nothing in all this that can possibly be connected with Lady Redbourne, except that I started the rolling stone by my folly. Why on earth I dreamt of her and George Stent I cannot make out! She has never seen Stent, except on the lawn at Richmond, and probably knows no more of him than of the man in the moon. The notion of her saving me, too, is really quite absurd! What queer things a fellow dreams!—

so queer as to be absolutely unlike anything I ever could experience in reality. There must be something in it, though, for there is no doubt that George has done his level best to choke me. It will not be his fault if the Bank hold its own after all.'

While the tickets were being collected at Willesden, George Stent and his father, and William Stent, were discussing matters in the dining-room at the old gentleman's house.

'There has been a heavy run on Woodalls' since yesterday,' said the senior.

'Yes,' assented George, 'but they seem to have stood it all right.'

'It would be a sad thing if they went,' remarked William, 'though they do not deserve to get through it.'

'Certainly not,' said his father. 'A bank in which a person like Ronald Lascelles pulls the strings is bound to go sooner or later.'

'I wonder they did not shut up to-day,' remarked George.

'They won't open to-morrow' said William, with a thin smile. 'Feather, Nest, and Co. are called in by this time, I should think. And we shall see in the City article of the *Times* that an unsuspected and unaccountable panic brought the Bank down, but that no blame whatever attaches to any of the partners.'

'My opinion is,' said Mr. Stent senior, 'that they have got through the worst of it, and that they will be all right for the present.'

'What makes you think so, father?' asked George.

'Various circumstances which have occurred to-day. They have been restricting their business lately, I hear, so their liabilities are small; and their paying everybody without a hitch all day yesterday and to-day will restore confidence.'

‘Of course!’ said William. ‘But how did they do it?’

‘That I do not know. They must have had better friends than we thought.’

‘What fools their friends must be!’ exclaimed George. ‘As if such a godless liar as that fellow Ronald could help bringing a concern to grief.’

‘Probably he will do so at some time or another,’ said Mr. Stent senior. ‘But Providence is inscrutable. Some of the most impious men make a great deal of money; and perhaps young Lascelles will be no exception.’

‘I never can understand how such men can contemplate the dread hereafter,’ observed Mr. William Stent reflectively.

‘The chastening of adversity might have turned the young man’s thoughts to higher things,’ Mr. George Stent said piously. ‘If the Bank failed, and he had to work hard for his bread, he would probably become

worthy of grace at some future time. For his sake I could have wished that misfortune would overtake him thus early, before his heart was quite hardened.'

'You are quite right, George,' said Mr. Stent senior. 'Those views do you honour. But the City is worldly, George, and you must be careful when you speak to worldlings. They might misunderstand you.'

'Of course, father,' assented the son. 'We are alone here, and we may say to each other that, for the sake of Ronald's soul, the failure of the Bank would be a good thing. But that is only our private, spiritual opinion. In the City, and from the point of view of——'

'The British merchant?' suggested Mr. Stent senior.

'Precisely; from the point of view of the British merchant, it would be much to be regretted if so old and respected an institution as Woodalls' Bank were compelled to close its doors.

‘Well said, my boy!’ said Mr. Stent senior approvingly. He repeated the words with some gusto, rolling them out solemnly and slowly: ‘from the point of view of the British merchant, I should much regret if so old and respected an institution as Woodalls’ Bank were compelled to close its doors; and,’ he added, in his ordinary tone, placing one hand on George’s shoulder, while he pointed the forefinger of the other at William’s waistcoat, ‘I don’t think the respected institution *will*. Look here, boys: old Woodall is sharper than most of us think. Mind your p’s and q’s. His shop is as safe as the Bank of England, and will be all the stronger for the storm. If you don’t mind, he will serve us out some day. Hush! there’s Gimlet. Now let’s go to dinner.’

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

EDITH read her husband's telegram with a deep sigh of relief; and while she laughed at her past fears, she reproached herself more than ever for her suspicions. It was not only absurd, but entirely unjust to Ronald, to suppose such horrors as had kept her awake all night. The reaction which followed the news of his return made her very happy, and a feeling of gentleness, and generosity, even towards George Stent came over her. She could almost forgive his nasty, sneaking slander, though she could not yet forget it. She knew nothing else against him, as of course Ronald had kept the Bank's business to himself. Her heart

leaped when a cab drove up to the door and the bell rang. She ran downstairs to receive her husband, whom she found standing in the hall reading a letter, which had come from the office for him by special messenger. He scarcely noticed her approach, so absorbed was he in its contents, which were short enough, but appeared difficult to grasp, for he read the note three times.

‘Strange!’ he at last exclaimed; ‘who on earth was it? Oh, Edith, I beg your pardon! How are you, dear?’

Three months ago she would have been grieved to the heart because he did not fly to her arms first of all, before even thinking of a letter, much less reading it. But lately she had been so well accustomed to friendly instead of loving greetings that she scarcely noticed his want of warmth. Had she done so, she would have ascribed it to his business anxieties; for though she knew nothing of the cause of his journey,

she had read enough on his anxious face, and had guessed enough from his worried looks, to be sure that there was something very serious the matter. But this evening, in the hall, now lighted up brightly, Ronald also looked bright, and almost his own self again; though there was a line of deep thought on his brow, and a trace of fatigue in his eyes.

'I shall not be long dressing,' he said; 'I'm as hungry as a hunter. It's all right, little woman,' he added, seeing her look at him wistfully; 'I'll tell you all about it by-and-by.'

And when dinner was over, and he had lighted a cigarette, and Edith had placed a cup of black coffee on a little table by his side, and had just put the right quantity of sugar in it, she sat down on a hassock at his feet, and laying her arm on his knees said:

'Now, Ronald dear, tell me all about it.'

Now that the danger was over, there was no reason

why he should conceal from his wife what ordeal they had passed through. She knew enough of her father's business to require but little explanation. She had read so many letters from business people, had written so much for Mr. Woodall at Bagnuoli, that she understood, without any exposition of general principles how, if confidence is suddenly withdrawn from a bank, its failure cannot long be delayed. Ronald had prefaced his story by telling her that everything was now satisfactorily arranged, so she had no anxiety as to the result. But, before he had finished, she asked :

‘Have you any idea how this run was caused, Ronald?’

‘Of course I have,’ he answered. ‘People went about to their friends, and said they were afraid we were in a bad state. Then their friends told others, and so everyone rushed to get his money out. We have always had the private accounts of a number of City people, and of course these were withdrawn in

cash, while the business accounts were being taken out by cheques payable to other banks. The balance against us was terrible when we exchanged paper the night before last.'

'Well, but who started these reports? Who went about telling their friends you were in a bad way? Somebody must have done it.'

'Oh, yes; somebody did it. It is not difficult to guess who it was.'

'Who?' asked Edith, standing up in her excitement. 'Who could be such a wretch?'

'Why, the Stents did it, to be sure.'

'The Stents! George?'

'George and his precious brother, and father, and the whole kit of them.'

'How horrible! Why should they try to ruin you, Ronald? Why, George Stent is your brother-in-law?'

'Worse luck!' answered he. 'He tried to ruin me

because I offended him the other day about—about—some other matter.’

‘What about, dear?—tell me.’

Ronald could not tell her quite all, but he told her nearly the whole truth.

‘You know how he came in to us. Well, when we went out, he made some ridiculous charges against me; and when I laughed at him, and told him he must have been drunk, he went to fetch the old man, and they both came to the Bank and wanted me to apologise.’

Edith squeezed his arm.

‘And of course you would not?’

‘Well, I apologized for having left your party at Richmond; though I think I ought only to have asked *your* pardon, dear, not his. But I would not go any further. And that did not satisfy them; and George began abusing a friend of mine, whom I was bound to stand up for.’

‘Of course,’ assented Edith.

‘Then I threatened to knock him down.’

‘Quite right! The nasty sneak, meddling with what does not concern him a bit! He deserves to be treated as you treated the Marchese.’

‘That was not all. I do not think that there would have been more than a family row if Mr. Woodall and I had not refused to lend money on the security of some shares which we considered worthless. That is what finished it.’

‘But in all this you have been quite right, Ronald! You were right all through. How could they dare to speak ill of you?’

‘My dear child, I am sorry to say I feel that in the beginning of the quarrel I was wrong—very wrong.’ And he stretched out an arm, and laid it round her slender neck, and drew her head towards him. ‘I was wrong at Richmond,’ he said, kissing her eyes, ‘and that was the start of all the mischief.’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Edith, blushing, ‘that was *our* business—my business, not his. Besides, what had that to do with the City?’

‘Nothing, dear, and I assure you I don’t justify his actions, God forbid; for a meaner lot than the whole clan does not exist. But I understand them.’

‘I don’t,’ said Edith candidly. ‘I do not understand how anybody can be so vile, to his own brother-in-law, too! But did George go about with his father and tell people not to trust the Bank? Surely you could punish them for it, if they did?’

‘No; he was not so audacious. He would not have had the pluck to do that, as he might have suffered for it. This is the sort of thing, you know. He might drop in on Atkinson’s, or Cartwright’s, or any big firm for which he was doing business, tell them about prices, and inquire whether there was anything he could buy or sell for them. Then, when that was settled, he would ask: “Have you heard anything

about Woodalls'?" Of course they would say, "No; what was it?" Then, no doubt, he would at once pretend to be pleased, and say, "Oh, very likely it wasn't true—he was so glad; but there had been unpleasant reports about." Then he'd say, "Good morning," and go.'

'Well?' asked Edith; 'surely that is not enough to upset a bank like yours?'

'Not by itself. But then just think what might happen. People know that the Stents are connected somehow with one of us; so of course Cartwright, or Hildesheim, or any one of the chaps to whom George had dropped a hint, would go over to old Stent's, who is considered A 1, and he'd say, "What is this I hear about Woodalls'?" Then the old humbug would answer, "I can't believe it; I'm awfully sorry about it," and shake his rascally head. Then, of course, the visitor would cry out that it was true, then, and ask particulars. I'll take my oath that all they got out of

Stent was, "I know nothing against them. I assure you I don't believe the rumour one bit. But of course we have thought it prudent to withdraw our balance." I can see it and hear it all as if I had been there !

'How dreadful !' exclaimed Edith. 'What next ?'

'Why, next, of course, the men that had seen old Stent rushed and told everyone that the Bank was going, and in an hour the panic was started. It did not take long, I assure you, and I know this is how it was done.'

'And is there no way of punishing them ?'

'None,' replied Ronald. 'I shall try my best to find out how and when the whole thing was begun ; but I am pretty sure that they have not left me a single tittle of evidence to get hold of. No ; they are far too cunning for that !'

'But how unutterably spiteful and wicked !' exclaimed Edith. 'Now make haste and tell me how

the Bank was saved ; I am burning to know. I'm sure you did it, you clever pet !

'I am afraid I cannot take the credit of it,' said Ronald, tapping her cheek playfully with his finger ; 'I am not so clever as all that.'

'Who was it, then ?'

'Well, your uncle did it somehow, and I am wondering how. Here is all I know, and all *you* can know till to-morrow.'

He handed her Mr. Woodall's letter, evidently written in a hurry. It was dated 'Lombard Street, 6 p.m.,' and ran as follows :

'No doubt you will have received my telegram, which I sent in triplicate to the three addresses for fear of missing you. A friend of yours placed a hundred and twenty thousand at our disposal this morning at 11.30. Particulars verbally. Soon afterwards Weedon, of the Continental, sent over and said he

would discount our drafts on Walker, and I told him we did not want the accommodation. That settled it. The run stopped before lunch; and this afternoon a lot of them have been sending cheques round to make up their balances, as they say.

‘Yours affectionately,

‘E. W.

‘P.S.—Don’t talk at present.’

‘Who is your friend—your generous friend?’ asked Edith eagerly, when she had read the note.

‘That is exactly what I am puzzling about, and cannot guess for the life of me,’ replied Ronald. *I* do not know people who come forward in the nick of time, and lend large fortunes in a casual manner. I wish I did.’

‘I suppose that, unless you had had this money, we should all have been ruined?’ asked Edith.

‘Entirely. It came just at the eleventh hour. Of

course that Continental man heard of it somehow, and that was why he offered to help us. Yesterday they refused.'

'How nasty and mean people are!' said Edith. 'But there are some very good and kind, Ronald. This friend of yours, for instance.'

'Indeed you are right, dear,' he replied. 'I wish I knew who it was. That man might demand anything from me. I shall never forget this, if I live to be a hundred.'

'I should think not!' exclaimed Edith. 'I cannot think what we shall do to thank him. Words say so little, you know.'

'Very little. They are not worth anything.'

'And it is so difficult to prove that one is grateful, Ronald,' she said, after a moment. 'If that man came in now, I should hug him right before your eyes.'

'I wish he would give you a chance, dear! I should not be a bit jealous,' said Ronald smiling.

‘I wonder if we shall ever be able to do anything for him?’

‘My sincere hope is that we shall,’ said Ronald. ‘It is the more generous and the nobler that his money might all have been lost.’

‘Such a lot, too! It makes me quite dizzy to think of a man doing all that for a friend. What a good true friend you have, Ronald! How happy we are to possess such a one!’

‘We are, indeed,’ assented he. ‘I wish I knew who it was. But, try as I will, I cannot think of a single individual, nor any firm, who could have a tenth of that money to dispose of, and who would risk it for my sake.’

‘You have an unknown friend!’ said Edith, ‘and such a friend as few ever get.’

‘Well, I shall know who it is to-morrow.’

‘Ronald dear,’ she began, after a pause, ‘I want you to do me a favour.’

‘Anything you like, Edith,’ said he. ‘Go on. What is it?’

‘You must telegraph me to-morrow as soon as you know the gentleman’s name.’

‘That is not much.’

‘Oh no! that’s not the favour. I shall thank him in my heart then, when I receive your telegram. But I want to go and thank him myself as soon as possible.’

‘Ladies do not generally go and see City men,’ observed Ronald; ‘for I suppose it must be some man in the City.’

‘But City men do not generally lend their friends a hundred and twenty thousand pounds.’

‘True,’ he assented. ‘It is certainly an exceptional case.’

‘And you will let me, Ronald?’

‘We will talk it over when we know who it is.’

‘No, Ronald dear,’ she urged. ‘Whoever it is, and

wherever he lives, you must let me go and thank him for having saved you, and dear papa, and Uncle Edward and me, and everyone. Now promise.'

'Very well, dear, you shall go. I am sure he will be pleased to see you, anyhow, if you look as nice as you do now.'

For Edith had more colour than usual, and her eyes sparkled with the excitement of the story and its conclusion, while her dress—a simple muslin with light blue ribbons—suited her fair complexion and hair.

'Don't be silly, Ronald,' she said, in her heart delighted at his paying her a compliment at all, for he was very chary of compliments.

'I shall go to bed, for I was awake all last night,' said Ronald, yawning.

'I shall remind you of your promise to-morrow, Ronald.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHAT COULD HE DO?

RONALD was at the Bank very early—long before Mr. Woodall arrived. He read the letters—which, this time, all betokened returning confidence — looked through the books, and had a chat with Mr. Radlet.

‘A narrow squeak it was, sir,’ that gentleman observed. ‘Lord! when the governor rang his bell at twelve o’clock yesterday, I thought it was all U. P. I was never more frightened in my life.’

‘Who lent us the money?’ asked Ronald. ‘My uncle did not mention it.’

‘I don’t know, sir. It was there, ready for us at the Bank of England. Just in time, too! And I tell

you what, sir,' he added, lowering his voice. 'Mr. Woodall don't seem to know, but it's all along of those Stents.'

'I felt sure of it,' remarked Ronald. 'So you have traced it to them, have you?'

'Not quite that, sir. But you know the employés, and particularly the young men, hear a good deal of talk that a partner would not hear. I have no doubt whatever that Stent Brothers started the thing, and that Stent and Coweroft spread it all over. We have picked up as much as that from the clerks.'

'We must try and bring it home to them if we can, Radlet,' said Ronald.

'Indeed we shall, sir. A set of low-lived ruffians, to try and break a Bank like ours!'

At this moment Mr. Woodall walked in, and Mr. Radlet discreetly retired. In a few minutes Ronald was in possession of all the circumstances. The blood

rushed to his head when he heard the name of the banker's benefactor, and for a minute or two he was unable to collect his thoughts.

'Uncle Edward!' he at last said, 'you ought not to have taken it!'

'Not have taken it? Why I tell you she knew all about our position! She knew that without help we should have to stop in an hour. And she brought it on purpose to help us!'

'I should have refused it,' said Ronald, manfully.

'You would have been a great fool, then,' answered his uncle. 'Of course as long as I thought that she knew nothing, and considered the Bank quite safe and prosperous, I declined the money. I told her to go to her stockbrokers' and buy consols or railway debentures. I would not have touched it, of course. But when it came out that she knew what she was doing, that, in fact, she had come for that very reason, why matters changed altogether. Besides, she is a daughter

of old Monsell's, and was a customer of our Bank for years !'

Ronald knew very well that the late Mr. Monsell's connection with the Bank had not influenced his daughter, but he was so utterly surprised that he was unable to frame an answer.

Mr. Woodall went on :

' You will see in moment that I was right, Ronald. By refusing, I should simply have ruined my brother, myself, and you too. By accepting, I did no one in the world any harm. Just look at our balances to-day ! Why, by Monday next we shall be able to pay her her money back, and not even feel it. It's actually pouring in ! The fact is, they are all ashamed of having doubted us, and are trying to make up for it.'

' But she might have lost it all,' observed Ronald.

' No ! I would not have taken sixpence if I had not known that it would pull us round.'

‘We had no claim on Lady Redbourne at all.’

‘None, I confess. I suppose she considers my junior partner a devilish nice young fellow,’ said Mr. Woodall, who was sometimes rather more inclined to plain speaking than Ronald quite liked; ‘and I tell you what, my boy, she is a very fine woman—a beautiful woman, indeed!’

‘That makes it all the worse!’

Mr. Woodall stared.

‘Oh, you are thinking of the little adventure you told me about. ’Pon my word, Ronald, you’re a very lucky fellow. You dine with a lovely, fashionable creature at Greenwich——’

‘Richmond, sir.’

‘Oh, well, it’s all the same. At Richmond, then. You dine with this magnificent creature; she takes you home in her own trap, and a fortnight afterwards she brings you a hundred and twenty thousand pounds just when you want it most.’

‘You seem to forget, sir,’ said Ronald, who was extremely uncomfortable, ‘that I married your niece.’

‘Well, ’pon my soul I did, just for the moment,’ exclaimed Mr. Woodall, laughing. ‘All this put poor little Edith out of my head. But she is none the worse for it; on the contrary. Why, if the Bank had gone, there would only have been her money for you to live on, and that’s very little—scarcely enough for pin-money,’

‘I know,’ said Ronald, with a sigh.

‘What are you groaning about, then? Edith will be as pleased as any of us.’

‘I do not think so.’

‘Oh, buy her a new bonnet, and take her to the opera. It will be all right; she won’t be jealous. You are not afraid of her, are you, my boy?’

No, Ronald was not afraid of his wife. He was far more afraid of himself. A huge wave of gratitude was overwhelming him—gratitude to the very woman

whom it was treason to think of, because he could not think of her merely as a friend. He had worked for a fortnight to trample out every spark of a warmer feeling towards Lady Redbourne. He had to still his beating heart, called her a coquette, a flirt, a fashionable, frivolous woman. He had contrasted her character with Edith's, and had declared to himself that there could be no comparison. He had resolutely shut his mental eyes to her charms, to her fascinations. He would not think of her, not allow her name to cross his mind; she should be to him as if she never existed; he would not dream of her—if he could help it. Now this frivolous woman, who, as he thought, or rather had determined to think, had taken possession of him at Richmond for mere pastime, had flirted with him because it happened that he was comparatively new and fresh to her, this spoilt beauty who had married a decrepit nobleman for rank and position, this hollow, worldly creature had quietly

come down to the City and placed a large proportion of her own fortune in his hands—had volunteered a sacrifice which all the old friends of the firm had individually and collectively declined. How was this noble deed to be reconciled with the other traits of her character? How could the same Alma Monsell who had almost cut him two years ago at Ascot because he was not sufficiently grand for her, the same Alma Monsell who had promised to love, honour, and obey that dreadful old Lord Redbourne, of her own impulse risk a huge sum to save him, married as he was, from ruin? It appeared so inconsistent as to be incomprehensible.

Ronald had yet to learn that women are very often inconsistent and illogical; that the more a man sees of the opposite sex, the less he knows about them—except this, that their ways are not his ways, and are inscrutable to the masculine mind. If he had been ten years older, he would probably not have attempted

to account for Lady Redbourne's conduct. But if he had been ten years older, she would probably not have stepped in to save him from ruin.

He sat in his chair, disturbed by violent emotions of the most varying character, puzzled, dazed, not knowing what to say or what to do. At one moment he would have liked to scrape up the money and carry it back to Redbourne House. At another, his head was full of thankfulness, and he rejoiced over the new tie between that dazzling woman and himself. Then again he would condemn his own thoughts utterly, and impatiently wish to shake himself free from the obligation which bound him. For, disguise it as he might, he felt that the debt he owed to Lady Redbourne would not be repaid by merely giving her back her money. He would always owe her his commercial honour, and any wealth he might accumulate in the future, and every luxury he might lavish on his wife, his horses, his carriages, his very

home itself, would always be due to her and her only. It was a situation far too perplexing to permit him to converse calmly with his uncle, who meanwhile had been reading through the letters and attending to the morning's business, which promised soon to resume its usual course.

And how about the telegram which he had promised Edith? Should he send it? He must transmit something, or she would be anxious. Should he tell her the truth at once, or break it to her gently in the evening? He was tempted to the former course, for he was positively afraid of the construction she might put on Lady Redbourne's assistance. He was innocent of anything since the Richmond dinner, and had neither seen nor written to Alma. But would Edith believe in this innocence?—would any wife believe in it? And was he really so absolutely guiltless? Of course in the literal and legal sense he was perfectly free from sin; but he was conscious of thoughts and

dreams which would not bear discussing with his wife. He wished he had never told her of their trouble at all. Then he need not have told who had helped them through it. But it was now too late to repent his words.

He must tell her the truth. Even if he chose to conceal the name of the firm's saviour, on the score of business exigencies, Edith would be sure to hear of it sooner or later. Lady Redbourne herself would probably make no secret of her assistance. Perplexed and excited, Ronald at last sent a vague telegram, promising full particulars in the evening, and then endeavoured to settle down to the day's work. His power of concentration did not fail him, but he found it much harder to work than usual. As a rule, Ronald was able to dismiss everything from his thoughts except the business in hand, and was entirely a City man as soon as he reached Lombard Street, forgetting all about matters unconnected with the Bank's affairs.

To-day, he was no less assiduous than usual, no less acute in gauging the drift of the people with whom he spoke, no less intelligent in guessing what his correspondents really meant from what they omitted to say. But, instead of doing his work easily and without being aware of its difficulty, it was to-day one continued conscious effort. It cost him a struggle to keep hold of the threads of the various transactions before him, and only by rousing himself repeatedly to due attention was he able to carry on a sustained conversation or write a letter to the point.

When at last the showery, dull day approached its close, when he had read through and signed a huge pile of letters, had carefully, with less rapidity and far less accuracy than usual, compared the figures of the various cheques 'in' and 'out,' he gave a sigh of relief, but the end of his work brought no look of happiness to his face.

Most men rejoice when they have escaped a great

danger, and in the previous day Ronald had rejoiced greatly. Now, however, he could not share Mr. Woodall's obvious high spirits. He seemed to have lost his power of distinguishing between right and wrong. The circumstances were so involved that he was unable to decide what it was his duty to do, still less to do it. Thoughtful, anxious, and worried, he walked West, hoping that he would on his way home see what course he ought to pursue, what steps he ought to take to express his gratitude without again seeing Lady Redbourne, and also without appearing either to avoid, or still less to insult by a cool letter, one who had shown him her good-will in so noble a manner.

It was a hard problem to solve. If he had had no other duties, if he had been unmarried, he would have rushed off to Redbourne House and thrown himself at the feet of its beautiful mistress. He would have kissed her hands and declared himself her slave ; he

would——But it was idle and sinful to think of what he would have done under such circumstances, for he was not free, and he had to act according to different rules altogether. He did not dare trust his strength of mind by paying his benefactress a visit, in order to express his thanks in words ; Ronald knew himself and his feelings too well. The visit would be a dangerous one to himself, to Alma Redbourne, and to poor Edith. On the other hand, should he simply write to her and say that he was very much obliged for what she had done ? Would not such a letter, considering the terms on which Lady Redbourne and he had last parted, be nothing short of an insult ? It would indeed be an ill reward for her generosity, that the man for whom she had done so much should not even trouble himself to come round and thank her.

Perhaps stern moralists, who had never been tempted, might suggest that he should call on her,

and, in a moving and pathetic address, point out to her that his duty to his wife, and hers to her husband, prevented his doing more than thank her very warmly for what she had done. But Ronald could not very well now assume the character of the virtuous preacher; and, had he done so, he felt that he would be open to the extremely unpleasant retort on the part of the lady, that she never expected any more than warm thanks, and that it was a deliberate piece of impertinence to come and lecture her as if she had. And even if he could have been guilty of such a piece of fatuousness, he felt that one glance from those dark, unfathomable eyes would destroy his whole fabric of righteousness, and bring him to his knees before the offended beauty. Again, to pass the matter over in absolute silence, as if it had never occurred, was out of the question. Lady Redbourne might be justly indignant at such gross ingratitude—at the coolness which might seem to imply that she

had done nothing out of the ordinary way, nothing that deserved even commonplace thanks.

The more he pondered, the more difficult did it become to decide on any action; and yet the more necessary did action of some sort appear to him. Nor were even his reflections entirely guided by reason and morality. He tried his best not to be swayed by other feelings; but they asserted themselves nevertheless, and interfered with his thoughts far more than agreed with his peace of mind. So he reached home in a thoroughly disturbed condition. His head ached violently, he felt utterly weary, and yet his mind was too agitated to allow him to wish for rest.

‘How tired you look, Ronald dear!’ exclaimed Edith when she saw him. ‘I am sure all this work and worry has been too much for you. I wish we had not got to dine with the Bewdleys to-night.’

‘Never mind,’ said Ronald languidly; ‘I dare say

I shall be all right by-and-by. Give me a cup of tea, please. I have had a very hard day.'

He sat down in an armchair.

The tea was ordered, and then Edith asked a question which had been most on her mind during the day.

'Who was it, dear? Who helped you?'

'Lady Redbourne,' replied Ronald calmly, staring over his wife's head at the pictures on the wall.

'Lady Redbourne?' cried Edith, utterly amazed.

'Yes. I should not have let them take her money if I had been in the City; but your uncle Edward accepted it while I was at Leeds.'

'I know—I know,' said Edith hastily. 'But surely you had some idea of it?'

'None whatever, till this morning.'

'Did she send the money straight to the Bank, then, without any inquiries or anything?'

'So it appears,' replied Ronald, still looking at the picture. 'She even brought it herself.'

‘Good gracious!’ exclaimed Edith. ‘She went to the City, then?’

‘So they tell me. She rather astonished your uncle,’ he added, with an attempt at a smile.

‘I should think so, indeed! Did you not expect it, then, at all?’

Just then the tea was brought in, and the entrance of the servant interrupted the conversation.

While Edith poured it out, it suddenly struck her that she had better not ask any more questions. A horrible sickness came over her, and she had to grasp the edge of the chimney-piece to prevent herself from falling. For a moment there was entire darkness before her, and she felt as if she were sinking into a bottomless abyss. With a strong effort she recovered herself sufficiently to hand Ronald his tea. Then she sank into an easy-chair, and tried to collect her thoughts.

One terrible fact stood out clearly—a fact which no

one could doubt ; which even Edith, in the innocence of her pure heart, could not hesitate to accept as certain. This beautiful and rich Lady Redbourne was so much in love with her husband—with her own Ronald—that she had sacrificed a large fortune to save him.

‘Edith, I fear it is time to go and dress.’

It was Ronald’s voice which roused her.

‘Yes,’ she replied dreamily, and left the room without another word.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EDITH'S TROUBLE.

PEOPLE at the Bewdleys' remarked that the young Lascelles were not such good company as usual. *She* seemed dull and *distracted*; while he was excited and nervous, and talked faster, and listened less, than was his habit.

Ronald noticed his wife's low spirits, and asked her what was the matter as soon as they were alone again.

'Nothing,' she replied.

For indeed it was nothing which she could tell him. She could not reproach him with having inspired Lady Redbourne with a love strong enough to save

the Woodalls' Bank from ruin. That might be no fault of his. And if he returned the beautiful heiress's love, it would be still less right to reproach him ; for reproaches would not bring back to her his lost affection. So she was silent, brooding over her thoughts, and feeling that there could be no relief to her pain. She shared some of Ronald's feelings. She perceived, instinctively, that he was worried because Lady Redbourne had saved him, though she now fully believed that he loved Lady Redbourne. She knew Ronald too well to think that he could be happy under a strong sense of obligation to one who ought to have been no more to him than a mere acquaintance. He was evidently nervous and troubled about it, and she pitied him for his troubles, as well as pitying herself for her overwhelming grief.

It was too great and too dreadful to dwell upon. Her whole life was suddenly and entirely altered. There was no future for her, no hope, no pleasure ;

the harrowing doubts of the dreadful hours she had spent waiting for her husband were bliss in comparison to the awful certainty she had now acquired. There was an end of everything for her; it was useless to struggle against the calamity. She would do her duty as well as she could ; but she did not believe that she could bear her life long. She had no one in whom to confide. Her eyes were dry, and her heart was dead within her.

If Edith had had a mother, she might have wept out her sorrows in her mother's arms, and found some consolation. But her father was a thousand miles away, and she could not have told her father of her grief even if he had been in London. It would have been like accusing Ronald, and she had nothing of which to accuse him. Only it was her misfortune not to be sufficiently handsome nor sufficiently fascinating to preserve his heart in her keeping. She would have preferred that the Bank should have failed,

than that it should have been saved by Lady Redbourne. Far better to live carefully, somewhere in Italy, on her small income, than to owe the luxury of her surroundings to the woman her husband loved better than herself.

She could scarcely manage to speak to him. There was a choking sensation in her throat which seemed to prevent her uttering the merest commonplaces.

Ronald felt that a constraint was on both himself and her, and he sought means to pull down the wall which seemed to be growing up between them. He would have liked to tell her that he loved her as much as ever ; this would indeed have been literally true, as this history shows ; but even this white lie was beyond his power to utter. He wished to tell her that he had neither written nor spoken to Lady Redbourne since the Richmond evening ; but Edith might not believe him, or, if she did, it would look as

if he were excusing himself. His sleep was agitated, and he rose, scarcely refreshed, to take a walk in the Park before breakfast.

Glancing, as usual, at the *Morning Post*, he noticed a paragraph which stated that Lord and Lady Redbourne had left London for a time on account of his lordship's health, which was causing some anxiety. These lines were a real relief to him. He would at once write Lady Redbourne a short note expressing his regret that her absence from town prevented his thanking her personally for her generous aid at a critical time. At any rate nothing more need be done for the present. Edith would soon 'come round,' and he would himself try to forget the dazzling apparition which had removed George Stent's cruel hands from his throat. It was a reprieve, if not an actual pardon; and yet he could not repress a pang of disappointment that his duty no longer compelled him to call at Redbourne House

—a course which he had decided to adopt as the only satisfactory one.

At breakfast he endeavoured to talk to Edith, but found the task beyond his powers. It was Saturday, and by previous arrangement they were to go to Wimbledon on that day, and remain till Monday with Mr. and Mrs. Edward Woodall.

Ronald was afraid of this visit, because he could not gag Edith's uncle nor her aunt, and he feared that something indiscreet might be said. He took the precaution to ask Mr. Woodall not to speak of Lady Redbourne.

The senior partner smiled, and said :

‘ All right, my boy ! I suppose Edith is a little bit jealous, eh ? I'm not surprised. Egad, she's a fine woman—a wonderfully handsome woman !’

When Ronald asked whether Mrs. Woodall knew who had helped them, the old gentleman almost stared.

‘Of course she does! Why, she could not help knowing all about the run on the Bank. I was not home till ten o’clock for three days running. It would have been more than my place is worth not to have told her!’

On the whole, however, things did not turn out so badly as he anticipated. There were several people to dinner on Saturday evening; Mr. Woodall was very jovial, and produced his ’34 port, which was reserved for special occasions, and Ronald might almost have forgotten his domestic troubles if Edith’s pale face had not reminded him of them.

‘What a pity her nose always gets red when she is worried!’ was the brutal thought that struck him, as brutal thoughts will sometimes flash across the brain of even the most refined of men.

Edith tried to be merry with the rest, but failed signally; and her kind hostess could not but be

struck with her woebegone appearance and low spirits.

‘My dear child,’ she said next morning to Edith, when the late Sunday breakfast was over, and the ladies were supposed to be getting ready for church, ‘you are not well. Is anything particular the matter?’

‘I have only a little headache, aunt,’ replied Edith.

‘It is a very persistent one, then. You looked wretched last night; not a bit like your own pretty self.’ Mrs. Woodall kissed her affectionately. ‘Now all these troubles are over, you must not get ill, you know. I am afraid Ronald has been telling you of his business worries, and they have been too much for you.’

‘I shall soon be all right,’ answered Edith, smiling faintly.

‘I wish you would lie down in the little drawing-

room instead of going to church,' continued Mrs. Woodall. 'I am sure you ought not to do anything. You want rest dreadfully.'

'I am not tired, aunt, really. We have not been out much this week.'

'You had not much chance, considering how matters have stood in the City. Poor Ronald! Your uncle says if it had not been for him, everything would have been lost. He is wonderful for his age. So clever, so steady, and so careful.'

Mrs. Woodall had an intuitive idea that Edith's depression was somehow connected with Ronald. She could not have framed her suspicion in words, but she guessed that there was something not quite right in the domestic affairs of the young people. What should please a wife more than praise of her husband? So she praised him.

'He is very good,' said Edith quietly. 'I am glad my uncle thinks so well of him.'

'My dear,' her aunt went on, 'he says that he could retire to-morrow, and that Ronald would manage everything better than he does himself.'

'Papa will be very glad to come back to England, and leave the Portino business for Ronald,' remarked Edith.

'And we shall be very sorry to lose you, though, of course, it will be a great pleasure to us to have your father here again,' said Mrs. Woodall, kissing Edith again. 'Now, child, follow my instructions and lie down. I will not take you to church—I won't, indeed.'

Edith was obliged to obey the kind old lady's orders. Nor was she quite sorry, for the morbid feeling had grown up in her heart that she was better out of Ronald's sight—that he was happier without her than in her society. He had been strangely talkative and excited again on the previous evening, but absolutely silent as soon as they had retired to their

room. It was evident, too evident, that she was rapidly losing all hold on his affection. Still she did not weep over her misfortunes.

She lay all the morning on the sofa, thinking and scheming. Would it not be better for Ronald if she were out of the way altogether—if she disappeared from his existence and left him free? She was now only a clog and a hindrance to him. He was so clever and industrious that he had made himself indispensable at the Bank, and no longer owed anything to her. He would be far happier if she were to be suddenly lost for ever. No doubt old Lord Redbourne would soon die, and then he could marry the widow.

It would surely not be a great sin to drop out of life for the sake of her husband. She could not bear this existence much longer. She would just disappear, and no one would suppose that she had committed suicide. It would be very easy to take a

little too much laudanum, or something else, which would send her to sleep so that she should never open her eyes again. Would it be so dreadfully wicked? She thought not. But it was horrible, too, to leave this beautiful world, and the sunshine and the flowers and the bright sky, and never to see the blue waves of the Mediterranean again, nor the white houses of Portino, nor the vines trailing over the veranda at home!

Portino! Ah, he must have loved her there, when he risked his life for her in the wood at San Cristoforo, and stood unflinchingly before the Marchese's pistol. Oh! for those happy days at Portino, which were gone never to return! It would surely be better to die now, than to continue to live lamenting over joys which were past. He could not help it, she supposed. That woman was too beautiful, too fascinating, altogether irresistible. How could she compare with her? Of course Ronald could not avoid his

fate, and must needs admire her more than his pale, colourless wife. *He* was not to blame. Why, then, should he suffer? She would show that she could be as generous and noble as Lady Redbourne. She had not hesitated to risk her fortune in order to save Ronald from ruin; surely a wife could do more. A wife should lay down life itself for the sake of her husband.

Yes. She would do it. There was a bottle of laudanum in her dressing-bag, which she had used to rub her temples when she had attacks of nervous headache, which now troubled her occasionally. They sometimes came on suddenly, and the doctor had advised her to apply this remedy at once when she felt the pain approaching. The phial was marked legibly, 'For external use only,' and she thought that a teaspoonful would be enough. No one would guess that she had poisoned herself. They would be sorry, of course, and Ronald would be very sad for a

while; but he would soon recover, and perhaps some day thank her for having left him free to marry the glorious creature whom he loved, and who loved him.

Edith rose to her feet, and staggered across the room. The house was all but deserted. All had gone to church, except two servants, who were in the remote recesses of the kitchen. There would never be a better opportunity for her purpose. Besides, if it had to be done, the sooner it was done, the better for all concerned. Life was no such pleasure to her that she should seek to prolong it even by a day. She walked as quietly as she could to the foot of the stairs. Here she was forced to pause, as a sudden faintness came over her—a sudden sickening feeling of utter misery and of utter weakness. Through the glass door to the garden, which was wide open, came the hum of bees and the soft perfume of heliotrope. She could see the bright scarlet geraniums glistening

in the sun, and the young leaves of the horse-chestnut swaying in the light summer breeze. It was pretty, and brilliant, and peaceful! It was sad to leave all behind, and to be shut up in a box, and sunk into a dark, damp grave.

A shudder shook her slender frame, and she clasped the stair-rail convulsively. No! she would not fail at the last moment. She would not be a coward. She was going to death for her husband, whom she loved. Men, aye, and women too, had gone to death for the sake of something far more intangible—their country or their faith! She would be equally brave in a good cause.

With an effort she ascended the stairs, and, leaning against the wall with her outstretched hand to steady herself, staggered into her own room. The bag was on the table. She seized it, and dropped down on a chair. She soon found the leather case, which contained the fatal drug. She opened it with feverish

haste, and held the bottle up to the light. It was more than half-full. Surely a very small portion of this would soon end her own misery, and be to Ronald the beginning of a new and happier life. God forgive her if she was wrong! She was doing it for his sake, and she prayed in whispers to be pardoned if she was committing a crime. She took a glass from the chimney-piece, and poured some of the fluid into it. One more prayer, and the fatal step would be taken. She sat down again, and, holding the glass in her hand, slowly uttered the Lord's Prayer. Then, closing her eyes, she raised the draught to her lips.

Suddenly she opened them again wide; a flush of colour rushed to her white face, and crying, 'O God, forgive me!—I forgot!' she dropped the glass, which crashed on the floor. Then throwing herself down on her knees by the bed, she buried her face in her hands and implored Divine mercy. A stream of tears burst from her eyes, which had been hot and dry

for so long ; and, in the agony of remorse, she pressed her hands to her bosom and sobbed aloud.

‘ What a wretch I am ! ’ she said between her sobs. ‘ To forget the poor little baby—my own unborn child ! Shall I ever be forgiven for wanting to take away its life as well as my own ? How could I be so wicked as to forget it, and think only of my own selfish grief, instead of trying to be a better wife than I have been, and to become a good mother to the little baby that is his as well as mine ? Thank God ! I felt its little heart beat before it was too late ! ’

For the sake of the unborn mite, she rose from her knees, and endeavoured to remove the traces of her agitation. The tears had relieved her, and once more she breathed as if life were not a burden. Worn out by the emotions of the morning, she lay down on the bed, and sank into a more refreshing slumber than had visited her for many days.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LADY REDBOURNE AT HOME.

ON that sunny Sunday afternoon, Lady Redbourne was in her boudoir—a bright, pretty little room which overlooked the long grassy slope of the park, and afforded a distant view of the blue Solent. Lady Redbourne was leaning back in a deep cane arm-chair, idly glancing at a bundle of letters which were opened on her lap. She was attired in a soft, creamy ‘tea-gown’—a dress which looked as comfortable as it was pretty. Her ladyship was making up her mind to a lazy, comfortable afternoon, and when there was a knock at the door a frown of vexation contracted her eyebrows.

‘Come in!’ she said. ‘Oh, I am so glad it’s you, dear,’ she continued, as Mrs. Hardy stepped into the room. ‘I was so afraid Redbourne had sent for me. Make yourself comfortable, and let us have a cosy chat.’

Mrs. Hardy was friend, confidante, and, to some extent, companion. It was generally believed that as she was possessed of only very moderate means, Lady Redbourne paid her a certain or uncertain sum for the pleasure of her company. The arrangement was an excellent one for all parties, and his lordship approved of it highly, openly calling Mrs. Hardy ‘a d—d sensible woman, who would keep Alma out of mischief.’

‘What do you think of this, Maud?’ asked Lady Redbourne, tossing a note over to her friend.

It was Ronald’s brief letter of the previous day.

‘He is evidently grateful,’ remarked Mrs. Hardy, after reading it.

‘But it is not very enthusiastic, is it?’

‘You do not wish him to be enthusiastic, do you? I should think you ought to be glad that he does not send you an overwrought, compromising sort of letter, Alma.’

‘Well,’ answered she, ‘of course I ought to be pleased that he is so prudent. But, to tell the truth, I don’t mind a little romance. It is such a relief after the twaddle and petty scandal one hears from most of the men.’

‘So it may be, but it is dangerous, dear. I should have thought that you would have been the last person to indulge in romantic ideas, or let any one else do so—at any rate about yourself.’

‘My dear Maud, after all this time you ought really to know me better. Do you suppose that because I married Lord Redbourne I have no heart?’

‘I know you have a heart, darling,’ answered Mrs. Hardy, rising and kissing her friend, ‘or you would

not have done so much for me and others. But, you know, a good heart does not imply that you should give a young man nearly half your fortune, nor that you should indulge in romantic dreams about it.'

'I suppose you think it was very foolish to help young Lascelles? You are always such a wise, judicious creature. Don't mind telling me—I shall not be offended.'

'Well, dear,' answered Mrs. Hardy, 'it was a very singular step to take. I do not know any one else who would have done it'

'Of course not!' exclaimed Lady Redbourne. 'That is a platitude; forgive my saying so. No one cared about him enough to do it; and if they had cared, they could not have done it. I suppose you would say it was my duty, as a good and faithful wife, to stand by and see them all ruined?'

'I will not pretend to say that, dear. But, frankly, do you think Lord Redbourne would have approved?'

'Certainly not, so I did not ask him,' laughed her ladyship. 'He has nothing to do with my money. He has plenty of his own, and my contribution towards the expenses of the household will be paid just the same.'

'Still, do you not think, dear Alma, that a woman ought in all such cases to consult her husband and do as he wishes?' observed Mrs. Hardy, sticking to her point.

'My dear Maud, there ought really to be no more of this nonsense between you and me. What sort of a husband do you think I am possessed of? Is he gentle, kind, affectionate, handsome, and young?'

'But you knew that he was not young nor handsome when you married him. You chose to accept him, and to swear to love, honour, and obey him!'

'Maud, when I married him I did it to please my mother. She is quite happy now in Washington Square and Newport, talking of her daughter, the

Countess of Redbourne. It's no use telling her that people don't use their titles in full. She *will* call me the Countess as long as she is at home: I will do her the justice to say that when she comes to us she generally drops it.'

Mrs. Hardy was not so easily silenced.

'You cannot say with truth, dear Alma, that your mother could have forced you to marry if you had not consented. You were your own mistress, and you could have refused him if you had liked.'

'So I might, at the expense of a family quarrel. Life is dull enough as it is, without domestic disagreements. But, besides, I did not think that it would be so bad as it has turned out,' added Lady Redbourne in a lower and sadder tone, as she leant back in the armchair and sighed. 'You have no idea what it is, Maud. I have never breathed a word to anyone.'

'Tell me, dear, if it will relieve you at all.'

Lady Redbourne was silent for a few moments. At last she spoke, very quietly, and without a trace of the levity which had characterized her previous tone.

'I will tell you all, not because I cannot keep it to myself like some women who must needs chatter about everything that happens to them at home, but because I do not want you to have a bad opinion of me, dear.'

'That I should never have!' exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, laying her hand on Lady Redbourne's taper fingers.

'And,' continued she, without noticing the friendly gesture, 'I really feel that I should be the better for your advice and help. You are a very good woman, Maud; but I am not so *very* bad.'

'I never thought you were, dear! And I am sure I am not half so good as you suppose.'

'Oh yes, you are. You do your duty, and all that. You think it horrible for a married woman to have the least flirtation with anyone. As to flirting with a

married man, that is quite shocking, is it not, dear ?' inquired Lady Redbourne with one of her roguish smiles.

' I cannot say I approve of it.'

' Of course not. Who does ? But it is so difficult to do one's duty. Just look at Lord Redbourne ! You know something of his temper. You have seen it in public ; but I assure you, dear, in private it is positively awful ! Do you know that the old man has actually struck me ?'

' How dreadful !' exclaimed Mrs. Hardy. ' Poor child !'

' When I married him, I did not expect *that*, at any rate,' continued Lady Redbourne. ' And that is only one example. I cannot tell you everything, Maud dear ; but you will believe me when I say that it is dreadful to have to live with him. I tried to bear it all with patience—I really did. But I think many women would have run away. I have often been tempted to do so.'

‘Poor child!’ said Mrs. Hardy again, kneeling down by Lady Redbourne’s chair, and clasping her arms round her neck.

‘But I gradually found out that he did not care what I did, so long as there was no scandal; and I could take the head of the table, and receive people, and not interfere with his tastes—very peculiar tastes, I assure you! The more I tried to be a good wife to him, the more I was abused and bullied. The best plan was to leave him alone, and go my way, and let him go his. So I have enjoyed myself pretty well last season and this. But, you know, it gets tiresome after a time!’

‘Of course,’ assented Mrs. Hardy.

‘And when I met Mr. Lascelles the other evening, all the memories of old times came back with a rush—the times when I was an innocent girl, though I may have enjoyed a slight flirtation occasionally! And I was so glad to see him—so very glad!’

‘Are you very fond of him, dear?’ asked Mrs. Hardy, leaning her cheek caressingly against Lady Redbourne’s, and pressing her hands.

‘I hardly know,’ replied she. ‘I like him better, far better, than anyone else I have ever met. He is so nice and simple and straightforward. There is no nonsense about him. I would have married him three years ago, if mamma had not prevented it. I know he was only waiting for an opportunity to propose.’

‘He had nothing at all then, had he?’

‘Nothing—no position at all. He was a clerk or something in the Civil Service. Mamma said it was ridiculous.’

‘But surely you had enough for both!’ exclaimed Mrs. Hardy. ‘You might have married him if you had been firm about it.’

‘Perhaps so, dear! I only wish I had. But you see he had not even asked me; and how could I be firm about marrying a man who had not said he

wanted me? And as soon as mamma saw that he was paying me particular attention, she snubbed him dreadfully, and made me quite rude to him.'

'She thought that she was acting for your good,' said Mrs. Hardy.

'Certainly; and no doubt she did what most sensible women would do. She said that I was not to be a prey to a fortune-hunter,* however nice-looking and pleasant he might be.'

'She was quite right in that opinion.'

'Certainly. But poor Ronald was not a fortune-hunter—and—do you know, Maud dear,' she added, kissing her friend and pressing her hand, 'I should not have minded if he had been one, so long as he loved me.'

'Poor, poor Alma!' repeated Mrs. Hardy, stroking Lady Redbourne's dark tresses.

'Now, what do you think?' asked she, after a long pause. 'Do you think I was wrong to help him?'

‘Indeed not,’ answered Mrs. Hardy. ‘But how will it end?’

‘I wish -I knew!’ cried Lady Redbourne. ‘How, indeed! The poor fellow married for money, after all.’

‘Are you sure of that, Alma?’

‘Quite,’ replied Lady Redbourne calmly. ‘Look at me, dear.’ She stood up and glanced into the mirror. Then she turned round to her friend, with one hand slightly raised as if to command attention, showing the graceful curve of her arm, the white wrist and taper fingers. ‘Do you think a man who was really fond of me could ever be in love with that little fair woman?’

There was a smile on the full, red lips as she spoke. Her pearly teeth were just visible between them as her dark eyes challenged Mrs. Hardy’s reply.

‘I don’t think it likely,’ was the answer to the conscious beauty. ‘But, dear Alma, is it right

to be so proud of your good looks and lovely figure ?

‘Why not ? They are gifts of Heaven,’ said Lady Redbourne, walking to the open window.

‘But not to do mischief!’

‘I have done no harm. Was it mischief to save Mr. Lascelles’s bank from ruin ?’

‘Certainly not. I must admit that it was praiseworthy — almost noble. Only what will you do next ?’

‘Nothing. What should I do ?’

‘I fear things cannot remain as they are, Alma dear. You are very handsome, as you know, and fond of this young man ; he has every reason to be fond of you. It is dreadful !’

‘I do not see anything very dreadful in it,’ replied Lady Redbourne. ‘We have only met once, and I don’t suppose I shall see him very often.’

Indeed, I hope not,’ said Mrs. Hardy, devoutly.

‘It is far better for both of you that you should not see each other again.’

‘I suppose it is,’ answered Lady Redbourne, looking absently out on the park. ‘But he is the only man I ever cared *that* about!’

She turned round quickly to her friend and snapped her fingers.

‘You must resist that feeling. You must choke it down, and forget all about him,’ said Maud, approaching her, and placing an arm affectionately round her friend’s waist.

‘I know I ought.’ Lady Redbourne’s proud head was bowed down on Maud’s shoulder. ‘But it is so hard, so very hard! I am rich, and I am young and beautiful, and I know it; and I am tied to this ill-tempered, wicked old man, and I must not love any one, and must go on hearing all sorts of compliments, and seeing people love each other, and marry and be happy together, and all the time *I* am to have no one

to love me, to have no dear husband, no happiness—no nothing. Oh! Maud, Maud, you don't know how hard it is to bear!' And Lady Redbourne burst into tears, and hid her face in her friend's bosom. 'I don't care for parties and dinners and dancing,' sobbed Lady Redbourne, in disjointed sentences; 'I don't want diamonds and carriages. I want some one to love, and some one to love me, really and truly. I hate going to races, and having those horrid men, with their silly ways, hanging about me. Oh, Maud! I love him so dearly! Help me, Maud!—help me!' she cried piteously, like the spoiled child that she was.

Mrs. Hardy made Lady Redbourne lie down on the sofa, and soothed her as well as she could. But she would not allow her to indulge too long in her grief.

'You must not cry for the moon, dear,' she said, as sternly as she could. 'You will have to do without it.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RONALD'S REVENGE.

THE next two days in the City were full of unquiet rumours. There was a general feeling of uneasiness, which found expression in what is termed 'flatness.' The high prices of many new speculative shares gave way. On the Tuesday there was a strong tendency to sell. Some of the less adventurous took fright, and at noon the failure of two firms was announced. The firms were neither large nor important, but they had been considered solvent and successful. The news from other places was not encouraging, and cautious people began to fear that there might be a general collapse. Woodalls' engagements had been reduced

to absolute insignificance by the events of the past week, following on the caution which the London partners had exercised for some time, so that Ronald had ample time to look about him, pay visits, and make inquiries.

No one could give any better reasons for the sudden cessation of business than the excess of speculation which had been indulged in for so long, and the consequent over-production in various branches of manufacture. Iron fell rapidly in price, and offers of every description of goods came from the manufacturing districts. Though the depression might not injure the Bank, beyond delaying its making profits, Mr. Woodall and Ronald could not but be anxious, and the latter found no opportunity for that mental rest which he so urgently required. He was very anxious to repay Lady Redbourne her advance; but, as the week went on, he was obliged to admit that affairs did not justify precipitate action. The

resources of the richest were strained, and the anxiety of the most solvent was severe.

The senior partner asserted, with some show of reason, that her ladyship did not expect to receive her money back within six days, and that she would be far better pleased that it should be kept in reserve to strengthen the Bank, than withdrawn at such a moment so as again to imperil its stability.

Ronald felt that he would not have a quiet night's rest until the whole was repaid with interest, and knew that even then the firm's obligations to their patroness would only be legally, not morally, discharged. But he did not dare to urge on Mr. Woodall a step which might prove dangerous, and would certainly at this moment be most inconvenient.

As it was, both had to keep their heads as cool as possible, for things grew rapidly worse instead of better. The requests for advances on various securities became incessant; and though many of such

requests came from old friends and customers, Ronald persuaded Mr. Woodall to refuse the great majority. Shares, which on the previous Friday had been saleable at fourteen or fifteen pounds, were down to seven on Wednesday, and to five on Thursday; nor were buyers plentiful even at the reduced prices. Woodall's had not for months past held any large amount of such stock, and what they had held had of course been sold during the run of the past week. The advances they had previously made—sparingly indeed in comparison to some of their neighbours, but still to some extent—had all been called in as far as possible. Now everybody was begging for fresh loans. Chios wines, on which Ronald had refused to lend, went down rapidly, like other speculative companies he had avoided. On Thursday afternoon these very shares were offered at fifteen shillings each.

A bad time had come, and all about Lombard Street and Throgmorton Street men were running hither

and thither with pale faces and anxious looks. There were no groups of smart stockbrokers with flowers in their coats, and smug jobbers with shiny hats, standing about on the asphalte, smoking and jovially chatting over politics and scandal. Everybody was trying to get money out of everyone else ; and when the Bank directors met, and again raised the rate of discount, the operation appeared more difficult than ever.

Even members of the oldest and most careful firms looked worried and harassed. It was hard to close one's ears and pockets against the appeals which were made to Mr. Woodall and Ronald ; but the latter, remembering the rebuffs of the previous week, and mindful of the narrow escape of the Bank, was firm as an old stager. It was trying work, and more than once he felt as if he would have broken down there and then.

‘ Mr. Lascelles ! ’ cried one, ‘ here is excellent paper !

Last week I could have done it at three per cent. I will give you ten if you will discount it.'

'Look here, sir,' said another, 'I have a fine business—a business which has paid well. I have worked it up from nothing. You are young, and you were born with a silver spoon, and you do not know what it is to slave day and night, as I have slaved for fifteen years, to make a prosperous thing of it. I have a wife at home, and three fine boys. I hoped to bring them into the City and leave them all rich when I am gone. Now I shall have to put up the shutters if I can't sell these shares. They were worth fifty thousand last Tuesday. Take them, and give me six thousand—for God's sake, take them! You will never be sorry for it!'

These gentlemen pushed their way into the inner room. There was no stopping them by crying that 'Mr. Woodall and Mr. Lascelles were engaged!' One after another, sometimes two at a time, they

elbowed themselves past doorkeepers and clerks, insisting that they *must* see one of the partners ; that there was not a moment to lose. Nor was there, for them.

It was easy enough to refuse the applications of strangers, who on this day walked in and impudently asked for favours which their own bankers had refused ; but it was difficult to get rid of persons who had trusted in the Bank, and confided in the Bank, for years. Mr. Woodall was less affected than Ronald. He had the courage to reply to very many that they had withdrawn their money last week, fearing that the Bank would fail, and therefore had no right to expect assistance to-day. Though the younger man did not feel equal to giving the same obvious reply, he was quite as determined, if not more so than Mr. Woodall himself ; but he couched his refusals more courteously, and avoided telling people that 'it served them right.' His feelings, too,

were less blunted, and every refusal was to him a struggle.

When at last the rush ceased with the stroke of four o'clock, the two consulted as to the firms whom they would be justified in helping. There were several whom it would be wise and prudent to assist in every possible way ; and at the hour when Ronald, exhausted as he was, ought to have gone home, both he and Mr. Woodall were calling on some of their customers to place various credits at their disposal. It was at the office of one of the most respected of these that the chief partner, after the conclusion of business, remarked :

‘ By-the-bye, Mr. Woodall, your family is connected with the Stents, is it not ?’

‘ By marriage only,’ replied Mr. Woodall. ‘ The sister of my partner, Lascelles, has married a Stent. That is all. Why do you ask ?’

‘ Oh ! they say Stent Brothers are in a very bad

way,' answered the merchant. 'Atkinsons are in a great state, for they hold some of their paper.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Woodall, pulling a long face, though inwardly rejoicing. 'I am sorry to hear it.'

'It does not affect you, I hope?' asked the friend with genuine concern.

'Not at all,' answered the banker. 'Stent and Cowcroft, and Stent Brothers, and the whole kit of them, withdrew their account some time ago. Good-evening.'

Stent Brothers in a bad way! It was no more than Mr. Woodall expected; but still it caused him a shock. Justice had indeed swiftly overtaken them! Only twelve days had passed since they had spread the reports which had nearly brought the Bank to ruin, and now they themselves were trembling on the verge of the abyss!

He hurried back to tell Ronald, whom he still found at the Bank, though the hour was late. The

old gentleman's face beamed as he announced the news.

'I don't often rejoice over people smashing,' said he. 'In fact, I don't think I ever was pleased about such a thing before. But, by Jove! I *shall* be glad if they go!'

For a moment Ronald shared his joy. But only for a moment. Better feelings returned at once, and he thought of his sister. Poor thing! Clara did not know much of business, and her only article of faith was implicit belief in the stability of the Stent clan. What a blow it would be to her!

'Well; what do you say to this, my boy?' asked Mr. Woodall, surprised at Ronald's silence.

'I was thinking of my poor sister, sir,' he answered simply.

'Your sister? Egad! I forgot her—poor girl! Sad thing for her, of course. But she did not help us last week. On the contrary, it was her husband who

first set the ball rolling. He would have ruined us if he had been able. At any rate he tried his worst—the blackguard !

‘It was not her fault. She knows nothing at all of business.’

‘Of course not; hardly any woman does,’ assented Mr. Woodall. ‘But she has got a rascal for a husband, and she must make the best of it.’

‘It will be a sad blow to my father,’ Ronald went on. ‘He had such a high opinion of George Stent !’

‘Aye, aye ! He was mistaken ; like a good many of us. Well, good-night, Ronald ; it’s high time to be off home. We’ve got everything pretty straight for to-morrow, in case things should get worse.’

Ronald walked home more sadly and meditatively than ever. There was no reason whatever to conceal from Edith the cause of his increased distress. She knew of the troubles in the City, as did everyone who read the papers. It would not harm her, he

thought, to tell her of the Stents' danger. She had seemed to be in rather better spirits since their return from Wimbledon, though she had not appeared at lunch on Sunday, and looked very ill in the evening.

When he had told his news, which was not till after dinner, Edith said, after a few minutes' thought:

'Ronald, could you not help them?'

His face brightened, and he kissed her. She did not expect a caress, and it surprised her.

'Dear child!' he said, 'I have been thinking the same thing ever since I heard. If I only saw my way! How glad I am you would wish it also!'

'Is it difficult?' she asked.

'Very,' he replied. 'In the first place, we don't know what they want. Perhaps we could do no good, and only hurt ourselves. Secondly, I don't think I could get Mr. Woodall to consent: he feels very strongly about it.'

‘I’m not surprised,’ remarked Edith. ‘But George has behaved even worse to you than to him.’

‘But George’s wife is my sister,’ answered Ronald. ‘I hate the beast most cordially; no one could hate him more than I do,’ he continued, clenching his fist as he spoke. ‘I should like to kick him now, the nasty, miserable sneak. But don’t you think it would serve him out thoroughly to help him? Fancy the beggar’s face when he hears it! It will be as good as a play! Lord! I must try it, if I can.’

‘That’s right, Ronald,’ exclaimed Edith. ‘I am sure you can, if you will’

‘It is not easy,’ answered he. ‘I must see what I can do in the morning.’

It was certainly not easy. The morning of ‘Black Friday’ will not soon be forgotten in the City.

The first thing that Ronald heard was that

Wendovers' had stopped payment; and half an hour later, the old and respected Ispahan Bank followed 'the great financial firm's' sad example. Things were in a terrible state; and for an hour he had not a chance of speaking to Mr. Woodall on the subject about which he was so anxious.

When at last he said his say, the senior partner looked at him as if he doubted the young man's sanity.

Ronald repeated his request with firmness, and pointed out that they had a very large reserve, increased beyond all possible requirements by Lady Redbourne's money, of which no better use could be made than to save a firm from ruin.

'But they won't be able to give you any security,' said Mr. Woodall.

'If they can't, of course I won't lend,' answered Roland. 'But I think I can get a quantity of shares, which may be worth very little to-day, but are sure

to rise. And I'd ask for Stent and Cowcroft's guarantee.'

'But you're a perfect idiot to do such a thing for a blackguard who tried to ruin us!'

'Never mind, Mr. Woodall; so long as it does not hurt the Bank. Besides, think what a pull it will give you! You will be able to chaff the Stents out of their lives.'

'So we shall, to be sure,' exclaimed Mr. Woodall, fascinated by the idea. 'I never thought of that. It will be a tremendous joke! But, mind! the security must be A 1.; and we must not go a bit further than we would for anybody else.'

'I understand all that,' answered Ronald, delighted.

Off he went to the old friends on whom Mr. Woodall had called the evening before. They admitted him at once.

'Mr. Trant,' said Ronald, 'do you know anything about Stent Brothers?'

'I'm sorry to say I do,' replied he. 'They'll shut up before the day's over. They have no end of Wendovers' paper.'

'We should like to help them, if possible,' continued Ronald; 'but there has been a little coolness between us.'

'Of course! I recollect. Why, I'm told they spread all sorts of reports about you a fortnight ago.'

'They were mistaken, at any rate,' said Ronald, with a proud smile.

'Very much so. The old Bank is as strong as ever, and,' he added, 'as generous.'

'Well, Mr. Trant, would you mind going round to George Stent's, just to say that if he will come into our place, we will see what we can do for him? I cannot go myself, under the circumstances.'

'Certainly, I will go!' exclaimed Mr. Trant, seizing his hat. 'Mr. Lascelles, you're a fine fellow. Most of

us would have been pleased to see an enemy smash !
Tell Mr. Woodall, with my compliments, that I
respect him more than ever. Shake hands before I
go, Mr. Lascelles. You're the right sort, and no
mistake.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN MORBO VERITAS.

WHEN George Stent heard Mr. Trant's announcement he scarcely believed his ears. And when there could be no doubt that the embassy was really a genuine one, he immediately began to wonder what Woodalls were driving at. His suspicion made him even more cautious than usual. Of course he was very glad to be helped.

Mr. Trant had found Stent senior in his son's room, and the old gentleman's joy was far more demonstrative, as indeed it was more real, than that of George. The latter at once suspected that it was a 'dodge' of Ronald's to put his firm into the power of the Bank.

He asked Mr. Trant whether any terms had been mentioned ; and, receiving an answer in the negative, said :

‘ My father and I will go round at once. But it will not be any use. I’d sooner shut up shop than throw myself on Woodalls’ mercy. And I know they will try to screw us in every possible way.’

Mr. Trant retired in disgust. He had said what he had to say, and was glad to get out of Stent Brothers’ office. That Ronald’s overtures should have been received in so cold and suspicious a manner fully confirmed the belief the merchant had entertained before, that the run on Woodalls’ had been entirely caused by the Stents.

But the latter, knowing that to decline the offer meant ruin, appeared at the Bank within a quarter of an hour.

Ronald directed them to be shown into the parlour,

and before father and son had a chance of expressing surprise, pleasure, or any other feeling, at once asked George Stent how much he wanted.

The amount was mentioned. It was quite within the Bank's means.

'Now what security can you give?' inquired Ronald, sharply.

George replied, giving a long list of depreciated shares.

His brother-in-law made him repeat the names slowly, and took them down on paper. Then there was silence for a few minutes.

'We cannot take any of Wendovers' companies,' said Ronald at last. 'They are all bad. You may think otherwise, so you had better keep them. As to the Ispahan Bank, where you had five thousand at call, we will take that as worth something—at least ten shillings in the pound. Lahores are fair; and Northern Japanese may recover. We can advance

something on them; but, to make up the amount you require, we want some collateral security.'

Then Mr. Stent senior spoke up, and offered Stent and Cowcroft's bills at three, six, and nine months. And in five minutes the matter was settled.

'Send the documents at once, Mr. Stent,' said Mr. Woodall, 'and your cheque shall be honoured as soon as ever the papers have been verified.'

George was dumbfounded. There had not even been a suggestion of extortionate terms, nor of 'putting the screw on.' The conditions were quite as liberal as could have been expected in piping times of peace, and such as scarcely any bank would at this period of crisis have granted to its oldest customers. But his petty brain was still seeking for some hidden motive. It worked slowly, and he was unable to utter even a few words of ordinary thanks. His father, who had always been much the sharper of the two, said:

‘Mr. Woodall and Mr. Lascelles, I do not know how I can thank you sufficiently on my son’s behalf and on my own.’

‘That will do, Mr. Stent,’ said the banker, standing up and opening the door. ‘Send those papers round sharp; we want no thanks. But,’ he added, as the two passed out, ‘perhaps you will think better in future of Woodalls’ Bank.’

When the door closed, Ronald threw himself back in his chair and indulged in successive peals of laughter.

‘George’s face was a study,’ he said. ‘That chap can’t make it out yet. He is trying to understand it, and he cannot. He still thinks we mean mischief. It does me good to see him groping about, and not knowing whether to laugh or to cry.’ And he laughed again.

Mr. Woodall was a little alarmed. Ronald’s laughter was not quite natural. He had been more

acute than ever that morning, and even more calm than usual while discussing matters with the Stents. Now he seemed excited, and not quite himself. He could not settle down to anything.

And during the day it grew worse, The figures in the books danced before his eyes, and he added up the same column over and over again and found a different result each time. He was unable to take any lunch; and as the afternoon wore on his head began to ache violently. But on such a day as this he would not leave the Bank, nor confess himself beaten. Scarcely half an hour passed without fresh news of some failure, and every successive telegram entailed replies : more letters, and more work.

Almost blind, and with throbbing temples, he plodded on, till even Mr. Woodall, preoccupied though he was, could not help being struck with his wretched appearance.

‘You are tired, Ronald,’ said he. ‘Go home at

once. It is past five, and the neck of the work is broken. I will see that the letters go off all right.'

But Ronald would not stir. There were still some important matters to communicate to their Italian agencies and to their Northern friends. Mr. Woodall could do the latter; but Ronald knew more of the former business, and the letters had to be written in Italian. It is true that there was a good Italian correspondent in the Bank; the letters could be short-handed in English and then translated by him into Italian, as was the custom before Ronald joined the firm. But this would entail great loss of time, and they might lose the mail; besides, there was no one sufficiently cognizant of the language to read through the letters and estimate every word at its proper value.

So, making a strenuous effort to overcome his exhaustion, Ronald determined to remain and write these letters. He ordered some strong tea to be

brought, and soaked towels in iced water, which he applied to his head. Till the clock struck half-past seven, he wrote on, throwing the sheets on the floor as fast as he finished them. The clerks picked them up, copied them, and placed them ready in the envelopes. When the last was completed, he called the Italian clerk, and made him read all the letters aloud to him—for he could no longer see at all, and it was vain to endeavour to read them himself. In ten minutes they were corrected, approved, sealed up, and stamped with the extra postage required.

‘Now, Tito, give me my hat. We can do it easily. It will not take five minutes to get round to Cannon Street.’

He tore the towel from his forehead; and clutching Tito’s arm—for if unsupported he would have fallen down—he ran off to the railway station, unheeding the clerk’s entreaties to let him post the letters. He repeated as he walked ‘If you want a thing done, do

it yourself,' and suddenly stopped at the corner of Clement's Lane. He struck his forehead with his hand and said, 'By Jove! I have forgotten her cheque!'

'Whose cheque?' asked Tito, surprised.

Ronald stared at him.

'Oh, you don't know. It's a cheque for a hundred and twenty thousand. It ought to have gone off to-day. I had better go back and send it.'

And he turned slowly up the lane towards the Bank.

'We shall miss the mail, sir,' remarked Tito. 'These are all letters to the Italian agencies.'

'Ah, to be sure!' exclaimed Ronald. 'Let us get on, then.'

'This way,' said Tito, leading his principal, who had tried to turn down King William Street towards the bridge.

If it had not been for the clerk, Ronald would have

been run over long before they reached the station. He would walk on swiftly for a few strides, and then stop suddenly, looking round, and apparently trying to collect his thoughts. Once or twice he said, raising his hand to his forehead :

‘ My head !—my head !’

They reached the station just in time. Tito saw the letters safely into the mail van, while Ronald stood by, taking no apparent interest in the matter which had so deeply concerned him but half an hour ago.

When they left the station, Tito hailed a cab, and determined on taking his chief home. The young man saw that Ronald could not be trusted by himself.

When the door was opened, Edith’s anxious face was seen in the passage. The clerk brought Ronald in, and addressing Edith, whom he had known well in her father’s house at Portino, explained that the Signor Cavaliere was overworked and tired out, and that he thought he should retire to rest immediately. He

offered to do anything that was required. Meanwhile Ronald was leaning against the wall, staring vacantly with bloodshot eyes. His hat was pushed to the back of his head, and he did not appear to know where he was.

'Where is she?' he asked at last.

'Here I am, dear,' said Edith, taking his hand.

'You are tired out. Come upstairs.'

'Send for her at once,' he went on, taking no notice of his wife.

'For whom are we to send, signore?' asked Tito, anxious to soothe him, and thinking he might be speaking of his sister Clara.

Ronald glanced at him sharply.

'Oh, you don't know, of course. Just go and fetch her. But you will not be able to find her. She will not come! No, no, I must go myself.' And he made for the door.

Tito and Edith held him back.

‘Let me go, I say!’ he cried, trying to shake them off. ‘I must try and find Alma immediately. She has been waiting for me so long—oh, so long!’

All were alarmed; but to Edith’s alarm was added the sickening knowledge that the dreadful truth was being made manifest, now that Ronald’s overstrained reason no longer controlled his words.

With the help of the servants, he was taken upstairs to his room, and cold water was applied to his head, while Tito drove off in search of the doctor. It seemed to be hours before the medical man at last appeared, and meanwhile Ronald had more than once struggled to get away, declaring that Alma was waiting for him. Sometimes he said he must go to Richmond; at others, that they expected him at the Bank, to sign a cheque for a hundred and twenty thousand. Then again he looked at Edith, and cried:

'You are too good to me. Send me away. I cannot help it. I don't deserve it.'

The doctor applied various remedies, and pronounced the complaint to be incipient brain fever, brought on by mental anxiety and overwork.

For several days the sick man's condition was serious; and in his delirium he raved often of Alma, and strove to rise from his bed to fly to her.

In Edith's delicate condition the care of her husband was a task almost beyond her strength. For, in addition to the terrible anxiety on his behalf, she had to suffer tortures when she heard his piteous, incoherent cries for the woman he loved so much better than herself. But, with faith and a strong sense of duty, the weakest woman can do wonders.

Edith would not allow Mrs. Edward Woodall, who at once came up from Wimbledon, to take her place by Ronald's couch. She engaged a capable sick nurse, rightly thinking that he would be better taken

care of by two people relieving each other than by herself alone. But Mrs. Woodall was not allowed to hear his ravings ; nor would she admit Clara—Clara less than any one ; for Ronald often spoke of George Stent, and laughed a dreadful laugh when his wandering uncurbed thoughts turned to the City man and his clan.

Mrs. Woodall suggested that Mrs. Lascelles should be summoned from Portino ; but Edith refused, on the score of her age, which would make so long a journey a serious undertaking. In reality, she feared that her mother might hear his rhapsodies about Lady Redbourne, and his too frequent regrets at his having married the woman he did not care for.

‘I must bear my cross alone,’ she said to herself. ‘Better that Ronald’s mother should still entertain the belief that she has done the best for him, than that she should find out, now it is too late, what a terrible mistake she has made. If he should die, I

must bear the blame for not having summoned her: it would be too dreadful if she heard all this, and her declining years would be made too sorrowful.'

The danger, however, was never very great after the first twenty-four hours, and in a week all delirium had ceased, and the fever subsided rapidly. Incessant application of ice, and all the appliances science could devise and loving care suggest, were brought into use, and not in vain. Soon Ronald was convalescent; very weak, very liable to headaches, but still rapidly improving.

Of course he could not know what he had said in his feverish wanderings, but he had some consciousness of the direction his delirium had taken. He often asked Edith what he had talked about; but she only replied:

'A lot of nonsense, Ronald dear. Don't worry.'

His wife's evasions convinced him that his inmost

heart had been laid bare to her, and that, probably, the visions of his illness had gone much further, and had hurt her much more, than a sober explanation of his real feelings would have done.

The doctors unanimously declared that he must not resume work for several months, and now it was only July. After much silent cogitation, and a private talk with Mr. Woodall, he said to Edith, one afternoon :

‘Edith dear, let us go to Eastbourne till—a certain event comes off. It is a nice, pleasant place, and does not get so awfully empty and dull after September, like most of the seaside towns. And then, when you are quite well again, and I shall be quite fit to work also, we will all *three* go off for good to Portino.’

There was an emphasis on the word ‘three’ which made Edith blush ; but the suggestion was a delightful one. Thus they would get away altogether

from the dangerous proximity of that fascinating woman.

And they carried out the plan exactly as Ronald had proposed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

FIVE years had slipped away since Ronald and Edith had moved to Portino. Slipped away—for they were uneventful years, and the time had but few landmarks. Two children were born to them, and the little beings waxed fat and chubby. Mr. Charles Woodall was settled near Heath Lodge, and his son had entered on his apprenticeship in Lombard Street. Mr. Lascelles was getting old, but still conducted Her Majesty's affairs at Portino. Now that Italy was a peaceful united monarchy, the work was easy, and worries were few and far between. Teresina was engaged to be married to young Donati—a swarthy,

stalwart youth of prepossessing appearance and charming manners. The Bank was prospering and growing with the increasing prosperity of the Italian kingdom. Affairs in Lombard Street were satisfactory, and no panic had occurred since the terrible Friday in 1866. The terrible events in France, barely over, had not injuriously affected English trade, and Mr. Charles Woodall had had no cause for anxiety.

Since the great run, the Bank had steadily gained in credit and popularity, till it had become one of the chief private establishments in the City. Lady Redbourne's loan had long since been repaid with interest. To the senior partner she was merely a pleasant memory. Mr. Edward Woodall often talked of the day when he was trembling on the verge of bankruptcy, and when a dazzling apparition, brighter than is often seen east of Temple Bar, saved the old firm from destruction.

But Ronald had not suffered and struggled in vain. To him Lady Redbourne was dead and buried. His love, if love it was, had been put away : no dream of black eyes and full cherry lips was allowed to disturb his slumbers ; no memory of the terrace at Richmond to divert his waking thoughts from his business, his wife, and his children. He had become a thorough family man.

If a shadow of what might have been ever crossed his mind, it was dismissed, as would be the sad and painful recollection of one who had left this life for a better. Hard work, alternating with harder exercise and attention to the numerous social duties of his position, did much to make him contented. He had every reason, indeed, to be contented with his lot.

Edith was far more in her element at Portino than she had ever been in London. Her husband was the acknowledged chief of the English colony, and she was the queen of English society in the Italian city.

But this regal position did not entail a fraction of the social work which an ordinary fashionable woman would have to get through in a London season. She had plenty of time to attend to her household and her children, and did not neglect the poorer friends whom, in her girlish days, she had relieved by her gifts and delighted by her visits. So Edith, too, had every reason to be happy.

Logically, these two people ought to have been the happiest among mortals. Blessed with ample means and an excellent position, blessed by health and strength, and, above all, by the good promise of their children, there was to the observer not a single shadow over their sunlit life.

Edith was moderate in her desires ; but, had she been less so, her means would have been sufficient to gratify even extravagant wishes. Ronald's favourite outdoor pursuits were sailing and cricket ; and in the winter he liked to entertain their friends occasion-

ally. All these things, and many more, were well within his resources ; and he could also drive the best horses in Portino, and have his wife's dresses from Paris, without even approaching the limit of his annual income.

What more, then, could any two people desire ? Was not their cup of happiness full to the brim ?

Yet both were conscious of a blank—a want which no money, no carriages, no dresses, no social advantages could fill up. Edith remembered with horror her temptation on that Sunday at Heath Lodge ; but the cause of the temptation still existed, buried as it might be deep in the recesses of her heart. She was under no illusion. That day, and the many days of Ronald's illness, when she pieced together those ravings which to anyone else were but incoherent nonsense, had destroyed all illusions. She knew that his love was not hers, and never had been, except

perhaps, as she fondly supposed, for a few weeks in Sicily. She had nothing of which to complain. As a husband and a father, Ronald did everything that was his duty, and much that was beyond his duty. He never wearied of going about with his wife, of contriving little surprises for her and the children. Far from neglecting her, he was, on the contrary, much more at home than most of the Portino husbands. All her Italian friends and many of her English ones envied her this paragon. Ronald did not flirt. He was attentive and polite to all ladies, and very bright and amusing with them when he liked; but there was never a breath of scandal concerning him during those five years. If Edith did not possess his heart, it was certainly not given to anyone else in Portino. She knew everything he did, nearly everything he wrote, and could almost guess his very thoughts. But not quite. For she supposed that he was still acting a part—that his sense of duty and his natural kindness

made him good and attentive to one to whom he was bound, but whom he could not love.

As a matter of fact, Ronald was not playing a part at all, nor were domestic ways against his inclination. On the contrary, he much preferred the conversation of his intelligent wife to that of other persons less clever and not so well educated. He took the greatest pride and pleasure in his children. He enjoyed an hour spent in playing with them far more than the same time devoted to cards at the Casino Nobile. So he was not a martyr, as Edith sometimes thought him. He had suffered acutely in the past, but he had long ago ceased to suffer. She, too, had suffered; and though she had, like Ronald, made up her mind to do her duty bravely and hope for the best, she had not been able to dismiss for ever the hope that she might, some day, regain that love without which all her comfort, all her luxuries, even her children, her whole life, seemed dull and insipid.

What both yearned for in their hearts—he without acknowledging it even to himself, she with frequent self-communings—was that spark of love which illumines the most humble home, and without which the most glittering palaces must become dull and dreary. Edith reproached herself with the wickedness of such aspirations, but they returned nevertheless, and continued so to assert themselves, that in truth she lived for one object only—to gain once more her husband's entire heart, and to renew the Sicilian days which had been the happiest in her life.

The sun at Portino was bright, the skies were blue, and the sea sparkled ; and yet it sometimes seemed to both that their life was devoid of sunshine, and that, if the love which was wanting had been present, they would have thought existence in the fogs of London or the cold mists of Scotland brighter than the sunny clime where their lot was cast.

Yet surely other people were happy and contented

without that romantic love which these two seemed to consider necessary for complete bliss ! How few among the married people they knew adored each other according to the poetic ideal ! In some cases the affection was all on one side : the husband neglected the wife who worshipped him ; or the wife flirted with other men, while the husband strove in vain for a kind glance. In others there were constant domestic bickerings and occasional real quarrels. In others, again, there was mere coldness, and a tacit understanding that each was to go his or her way. And where harmony appeared to prevail—where the husband was attentive to his wife, and she dutiful and affectionate towards him—there might be skeletons hidden from the public gaze, and the love between them might not, after all, be so perfect as people supposed. It was unreasonable to expect everything in this world.

A beneficent Providence had vouchsafed her best

gifts to them, and yet they were dissatisfied. Ronald did not show it—did not even think so. He generally believed himself to be perfectly happy and contented; and while no one is happy who does not think himself happy, everyone, whatever his misery and wretchedness, has only thoroughly to believe in his own happiness to become an enviable mortal. Only sometimes there would be a dull pain in Ronald's heart—a craving which neither his children's caresses nor his wife's kiss, neither brilliant assemblies nor a successful innings, neither a fine pair of horses nor a closely sailed race, would satisfy.

Edith was more truly religious than her husband, and sought consolation in better and higher things. But religion, embodied as it was to her in the meek, lowly, and insignificant English chaplain at Portino, failed to fill up the void, or to convince her heart that she had nothing more to desire, and that she was sinful in trying to obtain her husband's love.

Teresina's marriage was to take place immediately after Easter. It was now the end of February. The George Stents were to come to Portino on the occasion ; for Clara had not seen her mother for some years, and this was considered a capital opportunity. Stent Brothers had been more successful than before the crisis ; for George had learned a lesson, and his father had secured for him the co-operation of a clever manager, whose acuteness often detected what George's density would have omitted to notice. It was therefore arranged that he should take six weeks' holiday, and accompany his wife to Portino, whence he might make excursions into other parts of Italy while she spent some quiet days with her father and mother.

There were now several young George Stents, but the clan would take care of them during their parents' absence. They all took after their father, and would be quite as much at home with the William Stents or the William H. Stents as in their own nursery in Por-

chester Terrace. The family had had of course no recent opportunity of pressing their hospitalities on Ronald and Edith. The latter was spoken of with respect, and by the old gentleman with real gratitude. But George still privately stuck to his opinion—that there was something behind it, and that Ronald would yet turn out a very undesirable connection.

It was just such a day as when this story opened, seven years before. The tramontana was blowing; the waves were all topped with white caps. The sky was blue and hard as steel; the dust was whirling about, and the natives were hurrying along, holding their hats on their heads with one hand, while the other coiled the corner of their long cloaks over their mouth.

Ronald was in his office at the Palazzo Woodall. The ground floor of this ancient palace had been converted into the Bank premises, and modern improvements made the low vaulted rooms comfortable

enough. The entrance to the private house was from the Via Marina, and the attention of the clerks was not diverted by the visitors who, on a certain day in every week, drove up to the *porte cochère* to call on Mrs. Ronald Lascelles.

On this Wednesday the callers were not very numerous, the wind being so keen and cutting that the chilly Italian ladies were glad to stop at home. But at the Palazzo Woodall those who had the courage to face the tramontana found warmth and comfort. To-day Edith received her friends in a room far more home-like than the huge *salon* where no amount of fire was sufficient to thaw the cold grandeur. The boudoir was carpeted all over; heavy curtains excluded the draughts, and there was a real coal fire in a grate framed in by bright tiles. Soft sofas and seductive low easy-chairs from Paris had replaced the straight-backed, old-fashioned furniture of a generation which preferred grandeur to comfort.

Mrs. Lascelles was knitting in a corner near the fireplace ; Signora Donati was telling Edith of her future plans for her son, and discussing Teresinas's *trousseau* — a subject almost inexhaustible. For Ronald had undertaken the whole expense of supplying his sister with all those useful and ornamental articles of dress which are absolutely necessary for a young lady who is about to start in married life. He told Edith to order what she thought proper, and to bring him the bill.

At first the catalogue had been a very modest one ; but when Ronald was told of the amount required to complete it, he exclaimed that Teresina must be better supplied, and insisted on the number of dresses being doubled, and the quality of the materials being the best that could be obtained.

Edith was nothing loth, and the bride's future mother-in-law, whose homely heart was more easily touched by the old-fashioned luxuries of fine linen and

lace than by the modern taste for English horses and smart equipages, was delighted to be consulted in the matter.

Signora Donati had much native sharpness, but was gentle and kind withal. No Parisian *modiste* should get the better of her, nor take advantage of Ronald's generosity. There should be money's worth for the money. No spurious modern manufacture should be palmed off as old *point de Venise*. La Donati's eyes were too keen to be deceived by ingenious stains as if of age. She could distinguish between the work of time and that of coffee-dregs. Nor did the French chatter of the fashionable milliner persuade her to buy what she thought unnecessary, or to believe in the fineness of linen which her delicate touch told her to be in truth of inferior texture. Wherefore the two ladies were very deep in consultation, and both much interested.

Occasionally Mrs. Lascelles threw in a word. Her

function was rather to act as a drag on Edith's and Ronald's lavish inclinations, than to advise in matters in which she admitted herself far less experienced than her Italian friend. If a male visitor had been announced, at least two out of the three ladies would have been quite sorry that the very interesting conference should be broken up. But they did not expect any gentlemen, not, at least, till late in the afternoon. And as to the ladies who might call, why the subject in hand could not fail to be almost as attractive to them as to the persons more nearly concerned. For what woman exists, except a Girton girl, who is not fond of purple and fine linen?

Suddenly a hand pushed back the heavy *portière*, and the footman stepped in. Holding the curtain back, he announced :

‘ Milady Redbon ! La Signora Hardy !’

Mrs. Lascelles looked up from her knitting, astonished at hearing two names she had never heard

before. Edith became very pale, and rose from her seat. The surprise sent all the blood rushing to her head, and seemed to leave her powerless. Signora Donati turned her eyes towards the door, and exclaimed under her breath, as Lady Redbourne swept in with a graceful bow :

‘ Santissima Vergine, che bellezza !’

CHAPTER XL.

FORGIVE AND FORGET.

A HAWK had swept down on the dovecote, and the inmates were all fluttering. For a moment Edith was too amazed to speak, or even to make a sign. Lady Redbourne stood amongst the innocent babblers, a creature instinct with warmth and life. The glow of the fire was reflected from her face, and gave it more colour than usual. Her red lips were parted in that bewitching smile she could use so well; her graceful head, scarcely covered by the tiny bonnet of that period, was turned towards Edith in an attitude of courteous expectancy. She was dressed in black velvet, trimmed with sable; rich, almost bright in the

soft folds which caught the daylight and the fire-light.

The impression was imposing, yet full of fascination; almost magnificent, yet magnetic in its attractiveness. Behind her was the bright little sympathetic figure of Maud Hardy, who gazed round curiously, and appeared to wonder that her beautiful friend and mistress was not at once made welcome.

If Edith had been a low-bred and vulgar woman of coarse ideas, her thoughts would probably have shaped themselves into some such words as, 'What cheek! How dare she come here?' But Edith was neither low-bred nor vulgar; and, however violent her antipathy to, and jealousy of, Lady Redbourne, she would in any case have received her politely in her own house. There was, however, no room for antipathy nor jealousy in Edith's heart, great though it was. This woman had, she thought, taken away her husband's love from her; but she had saved him, and her, and

her father from ruin by an act of generosity almost unprecedented in its greatness. The injury was five years old, indeed, and would have been forgotten had it not left a scar behind—the one and only reason for repining at her fate. The benefit also dated long back; but its influence had scarcely died out. Its results were visible all round—in her happy home, in the prosperity of her husband and father, in the very room where they were now all standing, waiting for her, the mistress of the house, to speak to the unexpected visitor.

These thoughts flashed through Edith's brain in far less time than the reader requires to read them, but still the silence was beginning to be oppressive when Lady Redbourne broke it.

'Mrs. Lascelles,' she began, addressing Edith, 'I have taken the liberty to call, as we have just arrived at Portino. Will you allow me to introduce my friend, Mrs. Hardy?'

Edith strove hard to say that she was very glad to see Lady Redbourne. But five years had not yet taught her to tell a story with fluency, readiness, or unconcern. She blushed and stumbled and muttered something which the visitors were good enough to accept as if it were meant to be civil. Then, fortunately, she thought of introducing her mother-in-law; and the all-unconscious old lady at once plunged into friendly inquiries as to their journey, and the sort of talk which is sure to follow between two Englishwomen who meet for the first time in a foreign city.

Lady Redbourne sat down by Edith, and at once began her story, which she evidently considered necessary, in order to justify her visit.

‘My husband,’ she said, ‘has been an invalid for some years. We spent last winter at Nice. This season we went to Mentone; but it did not seem to agree with him. The doctors sent us to Pisa, and

there he became so very ill that I thought it would soon be all over. I was dreadfully anxious, and I telegraphed for Sir Harley Wimpole. He came last week, and said the only place to go to was Portino.'

Edith was obliged to say something when Lady Redbourne paused.

'You must have had a very distressing time,' she answered.

'Very. In England we had the advice always within reach ; but here, one feels so dreadfully cut off from all assistance. I do not believe much in Italian doctors, do you ?'

'No,' said Edith ; ' they are too fond of bleeding.'

'Exactly. At Pisa they wanted to draw I forget how many ounces from Lord Redbourne, and I had to take the responsibility of hindering them. Sir Harley says it would have killed him at once. And the worst of it is, Redbourne has lost all confidence in

his own man—a young doctor, who has been with us for more than a year.’

‘That is a pity,’ remarked Edith.

‘Yes, is it not? It is only his fancy; for I am sure Mr. Redfern is most attentive, and understands my husband thoroughly. We shall have to find someone else, though, because he cannot bear him now.’

‘When did you arrive, Lady Redbourne?’ asked Edith. ‘And where are you stopping?’

‘We got here last night, late, by the express from Rome. We are at the Hôtel Volcano. They say it is the best, and in the most healthy situation. But I want to get a furnished villa as soon as possible. To tell you the truth,’ said Alma, with one of her bewitching smiles, and placing her hand on Edith’s as she lowered her voice, ‘I would not have taken the liberty of calling on you, under the circumstances, if I had not been so sadly troubled, and in want of advice.’

Edith's heart was touched at once. Here was this woman, against whom she could bring no graver accusation than that she had once flirted for an hour or two with her husband, and who had since made up a thousand times for that offence by a signal act of thoughtful generosity, now asking so slight a favour as to be helped to find lodgings.

'I shall be glad to assist in any way,' she replied.

'I felt sure you would. You see, Mrs. Lascelles, it is not very easy to find what I want. For, in the first place, we *must* have sun and air. Then, of course, good drainage is indispensable. If there is a carpenter's shop near, or if they are building, or keep cats in the neighbourhood, Lord Redbourne would not be able to sleep. And the worst of it is, that it is so difficult to move him; and he suffers so much by every change, that if once I got him safely into a villa, I should be quite frightened to risk another move if he disliked his quarters.'

‘I quite understand,’ said Edith sympathizingly.

All constraint seemed to have vanished. Lady Redbourne was in want of her help, and no one in the world had a better right to ask it. She rapidly ran over in her mind the various places available.

‘Of course I know that you have lived here the greater part of your life,’ Lady Redbourne went on. ‘When first I heard of Mr. Lascelles’s illness some years ago, I heard at the same time that he had fortunately recovered, and that you had returned here.’

She spoke of Mr. Lascelles with perfect calmness, and without the faintest increase of colour. How Edith envied her that tranquillity, real or apparent!

‘Yes; I have spent all my schooldays here,’ said Edith, ‘and the greater part of my married life too. So I ought to know the place pretty well.’

‘At the hotel I inquired who the principal English

signora was,' Lady Redbourne went on, smiling. 'When I want help or advice in Italy, I always do. They all said, La Signorina Woodall; and it was some time before I guessed that *la signorina* was the same Mrs. Ronald Lascelles whom I had met—in England.'

Still Lady Redbourne spoke as calmly as if she had been discussing the weather. It wanted a closer observer than Edith to detect that there had been a slight pause before she had hit off the exact locality of this previous meeting, and that the mere reflection of a flush had risen to her cheek.

'They call me Signorina still,' Edith said smiling, 'for I have a great many friends among the old people who have known my father and the Bank for years. They are more used to the name of Woodall than to that of Lascelles.'

'So it appears,' said Lady Redbourne; who then at once proceeded to business, and to describing in detail what she wanted.

Questions and answers were continued until Signora Donati rose to go. The matter not being entirely settled, Lady Redbourne and Edith again sat down, while Mrs. Hardy continued an animated conversation with Mrs. Lascelles. At last Lady Redbourne said :

‘ Thank you so much, Mrs. Lascelles. Now I think I am thoroughly posted up in the pros and cons of all the places, and I will drive first to the Villa Palmieri. Good-bye. A thousand thanks again.’

She held out her hand. Edith took it at once in her own.

‘ Mrs. Lascelles,’ said her ladyship in a low voice, while her companion was exchanging adieux with the older lady, ‘ you must quite forget the past. We are all older and wiser now. Do not let there be a cloud between us.’

As she finished, she looked anxiously into Edith’s face. It was not her usual glance of pride and audacity combined ; she was humble, and might

almost have been taken for a repentant sinner. Her dark eyes looked imploringly into Edith's candid orbs, and she pressed both her hands. Her mouth was slightly open, as if she were fearing to breathe, lest she should fail to catch the words of forgiveness.

It was not often that Lady Redbourne had to plead in vain, and certainly Edith was not inclined to be hard or unforgiving. But it was difficult for her to throw off at once her past dislikes and suspicions of the dazzling creature who was now silently yet urgently asking her pardon.

Lady Redbourne lowered her head, and whispered :

'I was still young and silly then, Mrs. Lascelles ; and when I met him again at Richmond, I did not know he was married.'

'Oh !' exclaimed Edith in great surprise, and suddenly feeling angry with Ronald, 'did he not tell you ?'

‘He did, as soon as he had an opportunity,’ answered Lady Redbourne. ‘But there was so much general talk and chatter, that he could not at once plunge into his private affairs.’

‘Of course not,’ assented Edith approvingly, while Mrs. Hardy, seeing that her friend was in deep conversation, had started a new subject with Mrs. Lascelles.

‘It was nothing that ought ever to cause you a moment’s uneasiness,’ resumed Lady Redbourne earnestly. ‘*You* have no cause to be uneasy, dear,’ she continued, looking admiringly into Edith’s fair face and frank eyes. ‘Wipe it out, and forget it altogether.’

And she bent forward to kiss her.

‘I will, Lady Redbourne,’ answered Edith, returning her ladyship’s kiss. ‘Good-bye! I am so glad you came here at once.’

And she was really and sincerely glad. The danger she had feared for years had approached quite closely,

and was not so formidable as it appeared from a distance. Lady Redbourne was not a bad woman, she was sure. No wicked woman could have looked into her face so frankly, and have pleaded so earnestly for forgiveness. And, in reality, what was there to forgive? A slight indiscretion of her husband's—a trifling want of courtesy! The kiss was of course a wicked falsehood. George Stent had invented it. George had so soon afterwards turned out such a wicked story-teller, that she had never believed him since, whatever statement he made.

Had she, then, been contending with phantoms all these years, and grieving over the loss of Ronald's love, when she in truth possessed it? Perhaps so. Perhaps his ravings during his illness were nought but the disordered fancies of an overwrought brain; and possibly he was still her own Ronald, as he had been in the old Sicilian days.

In any case Lady Redbourne knew nothing of his

delirium, nothing of his vagaries, nothing of his doings. They had never met since they left London. There had been no correspondence between them ; of that she was sure. In short, everything pointed to one conclusion only—that she had been making herself very miserable for nothing at all. Lady Redbourne was not in love with Ronald, or she would not have come so frankly to Ronald's wife, asking her forgiveness for a long-past indiscretion, and her friendly help in the future ; and Ronald was not in love with her, or he would not have been so thoughtful and kind to his wife during these years, nor so apparently contented and cheerful at home. Then she had been fighting windmills all the time in the most quixotic manner, and had not only been foolish, but even wicked. For she had repined more than once, and had wished for what she already possessed, and had been altogether very ungrateful and very unjust.

When Lady Redbourne and her friend were once more in the roomy but comfortable and creaky old conveyance which the Hôtel Volcano considered its most fashionable equipage, the former began :

‘ I have made my peace with the little woman. I knew she was still angry about Richmond.’

‘ How could you guess, Alma ?’ asked Mrs. Hardy.

‘ I cannot tell ; but I felt sure of it. And, besides, she never forgave my having helped the Bank.’

‘ Forgave ? Why she ought to have been intensely grateful.’

‘ You poor innocent little goose !’ exclaimed Lady Redbourne, ‘ you are really quite too good for this wicked world ! Why, of course she was grateful till she knew who did it ; but when she found out that it was I, she hated me like poison.’

‘ I don’t believe it,’ answered Mrs. Hardy. ‘ Why she looks the best and kindest of God’s creatures.’

‘ So she may be ; but these quiet-looking, fair

women are jealous, Maud, very jealous : and when they are aroused, they can be more passionate than we dark ones. However, now it is all over. We are friends—quite good friends, I believe.’

‘ Why did you want to be friends with her, Alma ? I never quite understand you,’ inquired Mrs. Hardy.

‘ Because I don’t like not to be friends with anyone ; because we shall have to be here some time, and I could not get on at all without knowing the one Englishwoman who receives and sees people ; because I like her for herself ; because—oh ! don’t bother me, Maud,—because, in short, because I feel that I ought to beg her pardon for having been fond of her husband.’

‘ Oh, you darling !’ exclaimed Maud, kissing her friend warmly. ‘ And you have quite got over it, then ? I am so glad !’

‘ Quite, dear,’ said Lady Redbourne solemnly, pursing her pretty lips. ‘ I shall be very glad to see

an old friend like Mr. Lascelles, of course ; but he will only be a friend. All my youthful follies are buried and forgotten.'

'You feel perfectly certain of yourself, Alma ?'

'Absolutely—firm as a rock ! No more nonsense for me. I must look after his lordship. I am nearly thirty years old ! I won't flirt with anybody again ; and certainly not with a married man—least of all with him. But here we are at the Villa Palmieri ! What a pretty house ; and look at the view, dear ! It is perfectly lovely ! Get out first, please.'

CHAPTER XLI.

A CLOUDLESS SKY.

RONALD would no doubt have been much astonished if, on his return to their apartment, Edith had suddenly told him that Lady Redbourne had arrived. He might have been surprised into some exclamation which would have set his wife doubting again. But, as it happened, he looked at the cards in the ante-room before entering the boudoir, and among them found that of Lady Redbourne, which, for fear of her name being mispronounced, she had handed to the Italian who had opened the door. Therefore he was quite prepared for the intelligence which might otherwise have startled him.

As both his father and mother, besides several friends, were dining with them on that evening, Edith then merely told him what was public property—that Lady Redbourne had come to Portino on account of her husband's health, and was looking for a convenient villa. But when all the visitors had gone, she spoke more openly.

‘Go and call on Lady Redbourne to-morrow morning, Ronald, if you have time,’ she said.

He stared.

She looked at him frankly.

‘Why not?’ she asked. ‘There is no reason that you should not go, Ronald, is there?’

‘None that I know of,’ he said, hesitatingly, not knowing of the touching scene which had taken place between the ladies.

‘If there ever was, Ronald dear, it is quite at an end now,’ she said significantly. ‘I believe she is a thoroughly good creature.’

‘ Indeed she is ! ’ exclaimed he warmly. ‘ As if any of us could forget it ! ’

‘ Therefore the least you can do is to go at once and see if there is any matter in which she requires help. You men can do some things better than we poor women, and possibly she may want couriers and landlords settled with, which I am sure you will manage for her better than I can.’

So at about eleven o’clock he called at the Volcano, and sent his card up to ‘ Miladi Redbon.’

With what conflicting emotions he had been filled since Lady Redbourne’s arrival may easily be imagined. He believed that the old love was now quite killed. But even were it not quite dead, the confidence shown by Edith, and Alma’s visit to her, would have been enough to prevent its ever being revived. What he had done, and what his thoughts had been five years ago, was bad enough ; it would be still worse, still more unpardonable, if he now allowed himself

any relapse into fanciful visions and wicked dreams.

He was shown into one of those well-proportioned rooms so common in Italy, in which the admirably painted ceiling scarcely compensates for the entire absence of comfort.

He had not to wait long. Before he had had time to wonder what his reception would be, what she would look like, what she would say, and what he could answer, he was summoned into a smaller room, which the efforts of Mrs. Hardy and Lady Redbourne's maid had already invested with a certain air of home.

Alma came forward with outstretched hand. She was alone ; a glance satisfied Ronald.

‘ How do you do, Mr. Lascelles ? ’ she said, with her sweet smile, and looking very frankly into his eyes. ‘ I am glad you have come.’

There was scarcely a faint flush on her cheek. She was to all appearance calm and composed, as if she were receiving the most indifferent visitor.

Ronald, being only a clumsy man, blushed, stammered, took her hand awkwardly, and looked extremely uncomfortable.

‘We seem fated only to meet at long intervals,’ said Lady Redbourne, taking no notice of his confusion. ‘Do sit down. It is very good of you to come here so early.’

Ronald did not know what to make of it; but it gradually dawned on him that Lady Redbourne wished to ignore the past altogether, and to act exactly as if nothing more had ever taken place between them than a casual though friendly conversation.

He sat down and waited for her to speak, as he could not find the right thing to say at the moment. He was not very conceited by nature, but, remembering the sacrifice Alma had made for him five years back, it was quite pardonable on his part to suppose that she was then at least as much in love with him

as he was with her—probably far more. Now she evidently intended to take up an entirely new position—one in every respect better, not only from the point of view of morals and religion, but also from that of worldly convenience. Being obliged to come to Portino with her invalid husband, it would obviously have been awkward not to be on friendly terms with Mrs. Ronald Lascelles ; and still more awkward to be on too friendly terms with Ronald himself.

But such is the perversity of human nature—even of human nature which strives to be virtuous, and to avoid temptation—that Ronald felt rather vexed at being relegated from the position of acknowledged favourite to that of an ordinary friend.

‘Mrs. Lascelles told me you would be good enough to help me about my villa,’ Alma went on. ‘I hope it will not be too much trouble.’

‘None at all!’ exclaimed he. ‘What can I do for you? Have you found something to suit?’

‘Well, the Villa Palmieri would do, if I could get rid of the landlord, who insists upon living on the ground-floor with all his dirty children. That would never answer. If you could get him to turn out, and recommend some one to give the whole place a good cleaning, I should be so much obliged.’

‘I will do my best, Lady Redbourne. What rent does he ask?’

‘Oh, you can give him what you think proper. I don’t mind what it costs, so long as we are not outrageously robbed, and we get what is required for Lord Redbourne.’

‘I know your generosity in money matters of old,’ said Ronald significantly.

Alma held up a taper forefinger.

‘You must never allude to it again,’ she said. ‘And as we are alone, we may as well understand each other once for all. You have forgotten that we met at Richmond, have you not?’

'How could I ever forget it ?'

'You must. We were never there at all. It was all a mistake—a dream, if you like. It is a dream,' she added sadly, 'I have cried over often enough, and have repented bitterly. But it is quite over ; it has long been quite over. Do you understand ?'

'I think I do,' said Ronald humbly. 'It shall be, if you wish it so.'

For, do what he would, he could not look on that glorious creature and gracefully acquiesce in her being henceforth no more to him, no dearer, no nearer, than she was to any casual acquaintance.

'I certainly wish it. Unless you can altogether and entirely forget it, you will compel me to leave Portino,' said Alma, compressing her lips.

'Anything but that ! I will obey you implicitly.'

'Thank you. I expected as much from *you*, Ronald. I reckoned on your help in doing what is

right. I have made acquaintance with your wife, and feel as if I should love her very much. She must be a dear, good creature !

‘ She is !’ said Ronald emphatically.

‘ And she shall never have any cause to complain of me. Now we have settled that matter for good and all, will you see this wretched man for me ?’

Lady Redbourne handed Ronald a highly glazed card, bearing the name of the proud possessor of the Villa Palmieri. A quarter of an hour was then spent in discussing other matters in which his assistance was required, and, Mrs. Hardy having joined them, Ronald took his leave.

He descended the great staircase of the Volcano Hotel much relieved, and yet not entirely satisfied. He was, of course, very glad that the interview had passed off so pleasantly, and that no disagreeable consequences were likely to result from Lady Redbourne’s visit to Portino. On the other hand, he

could not help some slight surprise that she had been able to shake off so easily a feeling which he had thought to be almost a part of her being. It was not the same with himself. The moment he saw her, he felt that it only wanted a little encouragement from her to make him once more forget his duty and his religion. He knew his weakness; trembled when he thought of it; and thanked Providence that she was stronger than himself.

Yet there mingled with this thanksgiving a shade of annoyance that he should have been mistaken in her; that a woman who, as he thought, cherished a deep love, which could only end with life itself, should in five short years have been able so to conquer it as to meet her former lover without the slightest emotion, without a tremor, without a blush. The shade of annoyance, arising possibly from mortified vanity or from some other remote cause, passed off quickly enough. The satisfaction that things were

turning out so well remained, and he felt that it would be the better for his future, and for his domestic life, that the beautiful vision of his brain should assume a real and tangible form; that the face, which he had always dreamt to be loving and passionate, should become in reality cool and self-possessed; that the tender glances of his fancy should in truth be friendly, but no more; that, in short, the poetic ideal should become only a pleasant but prosaic acquaintance.

Ronald reported his visit very fully, and Edith hastened to return Alma's call.

The latter was soon installed in the Villa Palmieri, and for about a fortnight Ronald saw but little of her except in his wife's drawing-room. Gradually he dropped into his new position, and was surprised to find that it was not an unpleasant one.

Alma adhered very strictly to the programme she had laid down, and she appeared to be able to carry

it out without effort. If the fire was not quite extinguished, it was so completely buried in the ashes that no warmth penetrated to the surface.

Lord Redbourne's temper had not improved with his failing health, and no doubt his wife had a weary time of it, although the ample means at their disposal permitted the employment of any number of paid nurses, attendants, and doctors. What scenes she went through with the querulous invalid, what venomous words she bore in patience from his uncontrolled tongue, it boots not to relate. They made their mark on her beautiful face. For five years she had had to bear, as best she might, the harsh and evil results of her *mariage de convenance*. And for a portion at least of these five years she had carried on a fight with her own rebellious heart, which cried out for the unattainable, and gave her no peace. She had beaten down its wailings, and had stifled her repulsion to the wicked old man who

called her his wife when it suited his fancy, only to treat her worse than a paid servant when she unwittingly trod on one of his numerous moral corns. No paid servant would have borne what Alma strove to bear in patience and humility.

In this hard work she was bravely helped by Maud Hardy; and in her friend's companionship she found that repose which her mind and her nerves required, after she had spent many hours in endeavouring to persuade her husband to obey the doctor's directions; in trying to prevent his committing some egregious folly; or in inducing him to get rid of the disreputable persons of both sexes whom he called his friends, and admitted into his own room when he wanted, as he said, 'a little livening up.'

Ever since 'Black Friday' she had ceased to charm and fascinate London society by her frequent presence; the doctors said London air was injurious to Lord Redbourne, and her life had been spent in German

baths, French spas and seaside places, and Italian winter resorts, according to the seasons. Though her husband had never shown any real affection for her, and even in the earliest days had alternated between long fits of ill-humour and short periods of exaggerated civility, yet as his condition grew permanently worse, he became still more exacting, and was not satisfied unless Alma was always within call.

She had laughed scornfully when, five years back, Ronald had suggested that she was his lordship's nurse; now she had gradually drifted into the position she had then disdained. It was discovered by the doctors that when Lord Redbourne had a particularly foolish or wicked fit on him, his wife was the one person who could sometimes control him. He was ashamed to give way entirely to his evil ways and temper before her. And his lordship, having quarrelled with all his doctors in succession, now desired his wife to accompany him in his daily drives. Thus

much of Lady Redbourne's time and thoughts were occupied with the invalid, and duties, at first repulsive and irksome, became fairly tolerable in time. She always looked upon them as a punishment, though in fact they were nothing but the natural consequences of a worldly marriage; and perhaps the influence of Mrs. Hardy, who was fond of recognising the active intervention of the Supreme Being in every trifling event of human life, made her bear her trials with less impatience than she would, in the days of her proud maidenhood, have thought possible.

It is some little consolation to believe that one is especially chosen by Providence as an example, and to feel that one is expiating one's own sins and those of others by a consistent discharge of disagreeable duties.

Without Mrs. Hardy's advice and consolation, Alma might perhaps have rebelled, and left her husband to shift for himself, braving any resultant

scandal; or, again, she might have done her work perfunctorily and sulkily, telling herself that 'it served her right.' But, thanks to her friend, she actually began to take pleasure in making the wretched old valetudinarian as comfortable as she could, and in accomplishing, as far as she was able, what she had believed to be the special decree of Providence about herself.

It fitted in with this theory of hers that she should meet Ronald and give no sign. It was part of her punishment, now that she had conquered, as she thought, her ill-regulated heart, that she should meet with indifference the only man who had ever touched it. It was also a portion of the programme that she should make friends with his wife--the woman who, according to her former wild and impious views, had purchased Ronald, and had thereby done her an irremediable injury. In thorough good faith, and with the best intentions, she endeavoured to work out what

she and Mrs. Hardy believed to be her allotted task. And the beginnings were so easy that it never struck her, nor her religious and artless friend, that the path she was thus gaily entering on in the belief that it led straight to heaven might possibly, after all, have a sudden turn in the opposite direction. Just as Ronald, after a few meetings with her, fell into the position of an old and trusted friend; so she, after she had got over the first awkward interview, was able, without effort, to behave towards him just in the same way as she would have behaved to any other man for whom she entertained nothing more than regard and respect. Only savages, or men and women otherwise civilised, but who have not frequented society, find any difficulty in outwardly controlling their feelings on ordinary occasions, and the habits acquired by society's rules become so much a part of most people's nature that they are often mistaken for the promptings of nature itself. Thus before George

Stent and his wife arrived at Portino to attend the wedding, a state of things had been established which appeared eminently satisfactory to all concerned.

Edith took very cordially to the frank and beautiful creature who had been so noble as to ask her forgiveness for an almost forgotten offence, and the ladies met frequently. She and Ronald gave a dinner-party, followed by one of the usual simple Italian receptions; and Lady Redbourne was, of course, invited. She had the good taste to decline to come to dinner, on the very reasonable grounds that she had to attend on the invalid, but she and Maud Hardy came in the evening. Her stately beauty, united as it was to an American warmth and charm of manner very seldom found in Englishwomen, her rich and tasteful dress, and her entire absence of any hauteur, produced an excellent impression upon the party, which consisted in almost equal parts of Italians and English.

The Consul was delighted with her, and paid her

attention in a pleasant old-world style. Mrs. Lascelles admired and talked with her for nearly half an hour. Signora Donati and the other Italian ladies admired and discussed every detail of her toilette, and the men crowded round, anxious for the honour of an introduction. If any faint fears had still lingered in Edith's pure mind, Ronald's behaviour on this evening gave them their final dismissal. As host, it was of course his duty to be attentive to the most distinguished of his guests; but, while unaffectedly glad to be able to do the honours to so beautiful and attractive a woman, not even the most jealous observer could have detected in his conduct anything more than the deferential courtesy of a gentleman. He presented to her the most notable of his Italian friends; and when he had done all that was proper and necessary he devoted himself to his other duties, not forgetting to make Mrs. Hardy as much at home as possible. It was his father who conducted Lady Redbourne to

the buffet, while Ronald presented his arm to Signora Donati, who was as much pleased with the lovely stranger as any of the men, and hastened to invite her to the ball which would be given at her palazzo in honour of her son's wedding.

When the last of the guests had departed, Ronald metaphorically patted himself on the back. Perhaps for the first time he now felt sure of himself, and convinced that his romantic dreams and wild, lawless fancies had been completely driven away by sober propriety and solid reality. He need no longer be afraid of his rebellious heart or his too fervid imagination. His heart beat no faster than usual, and his brain was at rest. In his genuine pleasure that at last there was an end to his troubles and struggles, he was more affectionate than usual to Edith, who rejoiced quite as warmly, and still more deeply, that the siren's song was silent and that Circe had ceased to enchant.

‘Ronald, I am very glad,’ she said, when they were alone, ‘that Lady Redbourne came to Portino.’

‘Are you really?’ he asked. ‘So am I.’

‘Yes. Now I feel happy and relieved once more. I have been able to thank her for what she did for us.’

‘Have you indeed?’

‘Yes. I told her the story of those days, and what she saved us from. She actually cried. I am sure she is a very good, noble woman.’

‘I think she is,’ Ronald agreed.

‘It was brave of her to forget the conventional rules of society for a moment, and to do what most people would call a Quixotic and improper act. I did not understand it at the time, and used to feel as if I could never thank her for it.’

‘You have changed your opinion altogether, then?’ remarked Ronald.

‘Yes, dear,’ she replied, kissing him. ‘She liked

you before we were married, and she resolved to help you in that dreadful time, whatever people might think about it. I am proud that you had such a good friend. I *was* jealous, I confess—I was miserable and unhappy——

‘Never mind now, pet,’ said Ronald, stroking her fair head. ‘It is all over, and we are happy all round.’

‘Quite,’ agreed Edith. ‘And I like Lady Redbourne for herself. She behaves wonderfully to that horrid old husband of hers. Oh, Ronald! Ronald!’ she added, laying an arm round his neck, ‘I am happier than I deserve! I cannot forgive myself for having been so unjust and suspicious.’

A pang shot through Ronald’s heart. Of course he had never known how far his wife’s fears had gone, nor had he any idea of the terrible ordeal through which she had passed unscathed; but there must have been a sad and awful trial, for now, five years later, she was deeply moved when she thought of it.

‘When I think of that noble-hearted woman, and her life with that wicked, cruel old man, I cannot help seeing that I have far more than I deserve!’ continued Edith. ‘There are the children, and you,’ she added caressingly, ‘and there is nothing to trouble us—nothing at all!’

‘Nothing!’ assented Ronald. ‘Not a speck on the horizon.’

And at the same hour Mrs. Lascelles was speaking to the Consul of their son.

‘What a capital host he makes!’ said the fond mother. ‘And how proud he and Edith are of each other!’

‘He does things very well,’ assented Mr. Lascelles, ‘and seems very comfortable and happy.’

‘I should think so, indeed,’ cried his wife, exultingly. ‘See how right I was!—how much better I knew him than he did himself! I was perfectly certain that he would be entirely in love with Edith in a

few months. Now they have been married five years, and I am sure no couple could be happier. I only hope Donati will make our dear Teresina as good a husband as Ronald is to Edith.'

'I trust in Heaven he will,' said Mr. Lascelles, devoutly.

'I thank God that I had the strength to carry it through,' said Mrs. Lascelles. 'It almost makes me laugh now to remember what trouble Ronald gave us. I can laugh, for, after these years, there is not a cloud on their happiness.'

'None!' exclaimed the Consul. 'God bless them!'

CHAPTER XLII.

‘NO BIGGER THAN A MAN’S HAND.’

THERE were various matters on which Lady Redbourne required advice and help—matters in which she was unwilling to trust paid assistants, and which a lady could only do with difficulty here. There was the awkward question of medical attendance for Lord Redbourne, and there were various differences between her and the proprietor of Villa Palmieri. She required horses and carriages better than the wretched conveyances for hire at Portino, and she wanted stables to put the horses in.

Ronald was naturally referred to; at first for advice only; then, as Edith herself suggested that he should

help, Lady Redbourne accepted his active intervention. He was introduced to the querulous invalid at his own request, and persuaded him to accept the services of a young man who had been a college friend of his own, and who had taken to the medical profession rather later in life than most, from a genuine love for the healing art.

Lord Redbourne hated nothing so much as being bored. The flippant, cynical tone which Ronald had not entirely forgotten was revived by the invalid's own manner, and delighted him greatly. He wanted to have everything his own way—to hear the latest gossip, to be supplied with the newest scandal, and to be entertained by highly spiced stories; but he hated being ‘made a fuss about,’ and wished people to understand that he, Lord Redbourne, was quite sound in health, or only suffering from a slight and temporary indisposition.

Doctor Allen, to whom Lady Redbourne offered

the position of medical attendant, on Ronald's recommendation, was a cultivated man of the world, older than the young practitioners who had hitherto been Lord Redbourne's advisers, and with all the tact and good taste which only good society can give. Until he arrived, Ronald had to drive out with the invalid more frequently than he at all liked ; but as soon as Doctor Allen had been duly presented his success was assured, and Ronald was relieved.

The new doctor was chatty and cheerful, and did not look at all afraid of his lordship's dying suddenly under his hands. He never contradicted the old man, and even allowed him to do much which his former doctors had prohibited under the severest pains and penalties. He read French novels to him, and sometimes even joined the disreputable parties which Lord Redbourne insisted on collecting in his sick-room.

Doctor Allen was not, perhaps, strictly moral in this respect. But, undoubtedly, he persuaded his

patient to be more gentle and more amiable, and his efforts humanized the querulous old man in a manner the veteran sinner himself never suspected.

Ronald was glad to be relieved ; still more glad was Lady Redbourne, who felt a weight off her heart, now that she knew that her husband was in good hands, and was himself satisfied with the companion she had been able to provide for him. Allen was a gentleman by birth and education, and when, on the third day of his attendance, Lord Redbourne had shown a specimen of his temper by a coarse and brutal remark addressed to his wife in the presence of the doctor, the latter waited till they were alone, and then quietly told the invalid that he would return to England if he continued this sort of behaviour to her ladyship.

Lord Redbourne stared in amazement, and began a violent speech, which Doctor Allen immediately cut short by leaving the room. When he returned to the

sick man later in the day, he said calmly that he had accepted the post as medical attendant to his lordship under the impression that he was a gentleman; that no sickness could excuse coarse language to any woman, still less to Lady Redbourne; that he could not listen to it, and therefore must go, abandoning any claim to salary or compensation.

Lord Redbourne was at first very angry, but gradually cooled down and wound up by saying cynically, 'Well, Allen, I cannot do without you; so I suppose I must keep you on your own terms.' And from that day there was never a coarse or brutal word addressed to Alma.

The result of this change was, that Ronald's time being no longer taken up by Lord Redbourne, it was more at the disposal of his wife. Gradually it came to be a usual thing for him to walk round to the villa, after the Bank had closed, and drink a cup of tea in Alma's boudoir.

At first these visits were prompted by some business matters which required discussion—some horse that had' to be bought or sold, or some other trifle which would be better done by Ronald, with his knowledge of Portino and the Portinese, than by Lady Redbourne herself. But soon the afternoon call was almost a matter of course, without any special motive for it.

Mrs. Hardy was generally in the room on these occasions, and the conversation, though very friendly and intimate, never took a dangerous turn. Frequently other visitors dropped in; but afternoon tea was not yet an institution in Portino, and most calls were over before five o'clock.

Edith did not think of asking Ronald where he had spent the hours between five and seven. Before Lady Redbourne's arrival, he had occasionally played a rubber at the club; sometimes called on friends, and sometimes came home early to play with the

children. As he still went into the nursery at least once a week, it did not occur to her to inquire what he had been doing, and it certainly did not occur to Ronald to volunteer information. There was, he kept telling himself, no danger in these frequent visits. Mrs. Hardy was always there, and, besides, he and Lady Redbourne had many matters to arrange which must be attended to.

From time to time he had misgivings. To sit by her side, to look into those dark eyes, to make those beautiful lips open in that sweet, fascinating smile, to receive a friendly pressure from those small taper fingers—all this was very pleasant, but was it not too pleasant to be safe?

He pooh-poohed his fears, stifled his conscience, and returned on the next afternoon, talking and trying to amuse Alma till he was once more gratified by a flash of bright interest from the black eyes, and till the lovely curve of her mouth displayed her

pearly teeth as she laughed at some sharp remark he made.

One afternoon he left the villa at the accustomed time, about half-past six. Alma had been more animated than usual, and her smiles had been more frequent.

'My dear,' said Mrs. Hardy to her, 'Mr. Lascelles comes too often.'

'Why, Maud dear?' exclaimed Alma. 'Don't be afraid: he won't hurt me.'

'I am quite sure Mrs. Ronald would not like it.'

'Edith has sent him here herself, often and often,' said Lady Redbourne rather hotly; 'and you know how much he has done for me!'

'Too much, I am afraid, Alma. I am not happy about it.'

'I do not know how we could possibly have got on without him,' continued Lady Redbourne. 'He

found Doctor Allen for us; and Redbourne has been a different man altogether since he came.'

'I know,' assented Mrs. Hardy. 'But still, dear, that is no reason to let him come every afternoon to talk nonsense to you.'

'I cannot be so rude as to tell him not to come. And he does not talk nonsense, except what everyone is welcome to hear!'

'Oh, I know there is nothing wrong,' said Mrs. Hardy. 'He is a very charming man, and amuses us very much.'

'Well, then, to what do you object, you wretched preacher?' asked Alma playfully.

'I think he ought not to come so often, unless his wife knows all about it.'

'I dare say he tells her,' remarked Alma flip-pantly.

'I am sure he does not,' said Mrs. Hardy.

'There is nothing in it, anyhow.'

‘No, I do not think there is; and, if I can help it, there never shall be anything in it. But it must not go on.’

‘Oh dear! oh dear!’ cried Alma, ‘you want to shut me up altogether, Maud. You are too bad!’

‘Don’t try and evade the question,’ said Mrs. Hardy, almost gravely. ‘You know that I do not wish to shut you up. I want to prevent mischief; and it is not right that Mr. Lascelles should come every day and flirt with you like this!’

‘He is not flirting! You hear every word he says.’

‘Not always,’ remarked Mrs. Hardy. ‘To-day, for instance, you and he were talking in a low voice for ever so long. Besides, flirting or not, I repeat that, as you were too fond of each other in old times, it is dangerous.’

‘I can take care of myself,’ said Alma proudly. ‘I am old enough, surely.’

‘I want to help you to take care of yourself,’ said Mrs. Hardy; ‘and I also want to prevent trouble between those two young people. Mrs. Ronald is a good little thing.’

‘A darling!’ exclaimed Lady Redbourne impulsively. ‘I would not do anything to hurt her feelings for the world.’

‘Exactly so. I knew you liked her, dear.’

‘I like her immensely. She is one of the best and most sensible women I ever met.’

‘Then think it over for a moment, and say frankly whether she would like her husband to come here so often,’ continued Mrs. Hardy.

‘I do not think she would,’ said Alma gently, after a pause. ‘What am I to do, Maud dear?’

‘Only just suggest to Mr. Lascelles not to come to tea *every* day,’ said Mrs. Hardy.

‘That is very difficult to do, without also suggesting more than there is in the whole matter,’ remarked

Alma reflectively. 'Recollect, *I* feel quite safe. I like him, of course—I like him immensely. But it is nothing like the old feeling; quite a different one altogether!' she added positively, seeing a little scepticism on Mrs. Hardy's face. 'All the old wickedness is gone, never to return. There is not a bit of harm in his coming, nor any danger; but his wife might fancy something, and so he shan't come any more.'

'That's right, dear!' said Maud, kissing her approvingly.

'But I do not quite know how to set to work,' remarked Alma. 'Oh!' she added suddenly, after a short pause; 'his sister is coming to-morrow or the next day, is she not?'

'I think he said so.'

'Well, I'll tell him that, now he has visitors from England, and Teresina is to be married so soon, I

really cannot take up so much of his time; and he *must* not come to tea so often.’

‘That will do capitally,’ assented Mrs. Hardy. ‘You are a good, dear creature, Alma; I am so glad you see that I am right.’

‘Only about Edith,’ said Lady Redbourne; ‘only because of her. I love her too much to do her any injury, however slight: that is the only reason. Do not fancy that I am afraid of myself.’

‘You have less worry with Lord Redbourne now; and I think it is as well to be on the safe side, and to avoid thinking too much of Mr. Lascelles.’

‘And can I be so ungrateful?’ exclaimed Alma. ‘I am saved much terrible suffering and anxiety because he has helped me.’

‘I don’t want you to be ungrateful,’ said Maud; ‘only do not think too much about him. Remember your past folly and repentance.’

‘I shall not forget, indeed. Don’t be afraid, old

goosey.' Then she added, kissing her, 'I'll give Ronald a broad hint to-morrow; and now go and dress for dinner.'

It was on the next morning that George Stent and Clara were due at Portino; and Ronald did not look forward to the arrival of his brother-in-law without some little trepidation.

George had caused much trouble and suffering in the past; but [he had had a severe lesson, and was not indeed likely to interfere again. Still, Ronald felt that to him, and narrow-minded people like him, the present position of affairs might appear somewhat anomalous. George had no atom of tact, and might easily say or do something which would put his father and mother and all the English colony on the look-out.

So far, there were only four persons in Portino who knew that the relations between Lady Redbourne and himself had ever been a little more than merely

friendly. They were Alma, himself, Mrs. Hardy, and his wife. Now, there would be two more, and one of them the worst enemy he had ever had. True, he had done that enemy an enormous benefit; but the creature was very clumsy and stupid, if not, as Ronald almost suspected, spiteful and malicious. He was a dangerous person to introduce; while, without kindness and good feeling, an explosion might easily occur.

Ronald resolved to arm himself against any possible malevolence with the best of weapons. He would not give him a chance; he would abandon his daily visits to Lady Redbourne. George might stare in wonder; but there should not be anything of which he could lay hold.

Thus his own decision was on all fours with Lady Redbourne's resolution; and it happened that the latter was not called upon to put her wishes into words. For the very next afternoon he told her that

he was going to meet his sister and brother-in-law on the arrival of the ten o'clock train, and that he feared that until Teresina's wedding was over he should be very busy.

Alma seized the opportunity thus offered, and at once told him that he must not think of coming to her again till all was over; that as they were now comfortably settled in every respect—thanks to him—he need not be at all anxious, and so on. She promised to send for him if she wanted his services at all; and he left the Villa with a good conscience, while Lady Redbourne applauded herself for having followed Maud's advice, and having been able to do it so easily.

Ronald could not make up his mind whether to tell George Stent, as soon as there was a chance, that Lady Redbourne was in Portino, or to run the risk of the news being imparted to him in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles, when George would probably say

something stupid. 'Conscience doth make cowards of us all;' and Ronald would probably not have been so nervous about his brother-in-law's behaviour if his own conscience had been perfectly clear.

It turned out, however, that there was no occasion whatever for anxiety on this account, though danger approached from another source. In one of her recent letters to Clara, Mrs. Lascelles had mentioned the arrival of the beautiful American; and, long before they started for Italy, George, always ready to believe the worst of Ronald, had made up his mind that the whole affair was, as he termed it, 'a plant.' Translated into ordinary English, this signified that Lady Redbourne had come to Portino by previous arrangement with her lover, and that Ronald was that lover. Though nearly seven years of marriage had almost made a genuine Stent of Clara, yet her husband knew better than to tell her of his suspicion, or, as he termed it, his conviction. The precious clan had decided in an

after-dinner conclave that no other solution was possible, and that Ronald's audacity in vice surpassed all bounds, but could not be condignly punished.

None of them would have considered himself bound by ties of gratitude. Such a word had no meaning for the Stent family. But the fact was that they had fought once, and had discovered to their sorrow that Woodalls' Bank was stronger than Stent Brothers, and Stent and Cowcroft, and Stent and Co. all together, and they did not wish to try conclusions again. Therefore nothing could be done in the City to expose Ronald's scandalous behaviour. If, however, the family in Portino could by any means be made to open its eyes, and put a stop to the disgraceful goings-on of one of its members, those means, as it was felt by every one of the clan, ought at once to be adopted.

Mr. William Stent suggested writing to Ronald's mother. George did not at first disapprove of the idea; but Mr. Stent senior pointed out its dangers.

‘Never,’ he said, ‘put your name to paper, if you can effect your purpose without doing so.’

On the pressing necessity for action, being their duty as Christians and connections, he fully agreed with his sons; but on the manner of doing that duty he entertained other and sounder views, which, of course, eventually prevailed.

George went out to Portino in a double capacity. He was to be present at the wedding not only as the brother-in-law of the intended bride, but also to watch, report on, and, if necessary, expose Ronald’s nefarious conduct. The importance of what he termed his sacred mission made him more pompous than ever, and gave him the power of concealing his indignation when Ronald met them at the railway station. The latter took very little notice of his brother-in-law, whom he had not learnt to love in the past five years, and was entirely taken up by Clara, her maid, her boxes, and her news. They were to

stop at the Consulate, where the rest of the family was assembled; and though Ronald noticed George's fishy eyes staring at him more than once during the evening, he attached no importance to the circumstance, as George's eyes were always fishy, and whenever he looked at anything or anybody, the look was a fixed stare.

The wedding was fixed for the following Wednesday, and there was much for all of them to do in the few days which yet remained.

Clara wanted to see all her old Portino friends, and wished George to go with her. Mrs. Lascelles and Edith were full of preparations of every sort; and, as the Bank business would not stop on account of his sister's marriage, Ronald found that his time was very fully occupied. Still he missed his afternoon tea at the Villa Palmieri. Involuntarily he caught himself walking towards the promontory when he left the office; but he quickly stopped, and

turned the other way, to discharge his manifold social and brotherly duties.

During these days George endeavoured to watch, and struggled as well as he could against being dragged off to call on one lady after another. His periods of observation were short and irregular. But if he had been ever so constant and attentive he would have discovered nothing, for there was nothing to discover. He met Lady Redbourne once, driving on the Marina with her husband. He heard her spoken of more than once, but always merely as a lovely and agreeable woman. He could, so far, make nothing of the case intrusted to his vigilance.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WHAT GEORGE STENT SAW.

APRIL in Portino is generally warm, and this year proved no exception to the rule. When the bells clanged out on Easter Sunday even the chilly natives were not afraid to abandon their cloaks and to appear on the sunny Marina in spring garments. On every side there were signs of approaching summer. The horse-chestnuts were in flower; the buds of the Spanish chestnuts were swelling; the gardens of the villas along the seashore were fragrant with lilac; the violets suddenly disappeared, withered by the warm sun; tulips and ranunculi were in full glory; acacias and plane trees were covered with tiny drooping leaves.

The hotels were emptying rapidly, and foreigners were turning northward.

On this Sunday Mrs. Hardy entered Lady Redbourne's boudoir with a serious face. She had just received a budget of home letters, and its news of her nearest relation—her brother—was of such a nature that her immediate return to England was necessary, if she wished to see him still alive. She handed the letters to Lady Redbourne, who read them in silence.

‘I am so sorry, dear,’ she exclaimed, when she had finished them. ‘I suppose you must go at once?’

‘I should like to leave by the night train,’ replied Mrs. Hardy. ‘It would be dreadful if anything were to happen before I could get home.’

‘Terrible! You must take Jones with you, of course.’

‘You are very good, Alma. The maid will be a great help; I shall be glad of her company, too. But how will you manage?’

'Oh, Agnes can manage for the short time that we shall still remain here,' said Lady Redbourne. 'We shall be in England by the tenth of May, I should think.'

'That is a consolation to me!' said Maud. 'I am very uneasy at leaving you behind.'

'Why? Am I not in good hands?'

'The hands are too good in many respects,' answered Mrs. Hardy. 'I am not so certain of you as you are of yourself.'

'Do not fret on my account, dear; you have anxieties enough of your own. Next week we shall start; for Redbourne's yacht ought to be here in a few days, and as soon as she has been cleaned and polished up, and all the supplies sent on board, we shall sail straight for Plymouth.'

'At any rate Mr. Lascelles will not come home with you in the *Laodicea*,' said Maud. 'That is some consolation.'

Lady Redbourne raised her eyes, glancing at her friend with a flash of fun. 'Dear me, Maud, what a splendid idea! It never struck me before! I might ask him, at all events. It would be charming to have him to amuse me on the dull voyage.'

'Alma, Alma!' cried Mrs. Hardy, quite alarmed. 'How can you be so naughty! Such a thing would be positively awful.'

'Dont be afraid, Maud. I do not mean it seriously. Of course it would not do! I wish it would!' she added, with a sigh.

'I am dreadfully afraid of leaving you alone, dear,' said Maud again. 'I am not at all sure that it is right for me to go.'

'This is absurd!' exclaimed Alma. 'You *must* go. You are always talking of duty, and yet you hesitate. I assure you I should be ready to leave Portino at this very moment, if we could move Lord Redbourne. But you know he must not travel by railway if it can

be avoided, and the *Laodicea* has been ordered here on purpose to fetch him.'

'I know, dear. Of course you cannot leave your husband. But still I cannot help being anxious. You will promise to be careful, will you not?'

'Of course. I shall not see Mr. Lascelles at all till the ball at Donati's, and then I know he will be so busy that I shall not have much chance of doing mischief. Do you think me so awfully weak and foolish, dear?'

'No, darling,' replied Mrs. Hardy, caressingly; 'I know that you have done your duty, and have been brave and good.'

'Well, then?'

'Well, I am afraid—I am very much afraid—that you still care for him.'

Alma's eyelids dropped. A flush rose to her cheeks and suffused her temples. The sudden colour and confusion made her look like a maiden in her teens.

One would have scarcely recognized in the lovely, blushing creature the stately lady who had reigned supreme in so many drawing-rooms, and whose face only gave back a slightly supercilious smile to the many flatteries heaped on her. She shook her head.

‘I feared as much! Oh, Alma,’ exclaimed Maud, believing the blush rather than the negative sign, ‘be prudent, and think of your friend, his wife.’

‘Edith will always keep me safe,’ said Lady Redbourne, now again looking into her friend’s eyes. ‘I love her too much to let him care about me.’

‘That is right, dear. I feel that she will be a better guardian to you than I could be. Now I must go and look after my things.’

It was a glorious day—a real Italian spring day—on which Teresa Lascelles and Vittorio Donati were united, first in the magnificent church of Santissima Annunziata, and then in the modest, bare little English

chapel. Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles had lived so long in a Catholic country that their Protestantism was somewhat blunted. At any rate they had not raised any objection to the marriage on the ground of difference of faith. It was stipulated in the *contratto* that the sons, if any, were to be brought up in the belief of their father (which, to tell the truth, was rather an ambiguous term, since, like most young sons of United Italy, Donati would have been puzzled to say in what he believed), and the daughters in that of their mother. The match was a brilliant one for the dowerless girl; and as her parents had seen her youthful husband grow up under their very eyes, they had had every opportunity of becoming acquainted with the good heart and clear sense which were occasionally concealed by a little Italian swagger or affected cynicism. Bride and bridegroom looked supremely happy in their different ways: the former blushing and confused, but not for a moment tearful;

the latter exultant, with erect figure and sparkling eyes, with no fear for the future, treading as if on air, and proudly supporting the graceful girlish figure he had sworn to cherish and protect.

The wedding-breakfast was, of course, given at the Consulate; but when the bride and bridegroom had departed for their honeymoon tour, their friends were consoled by a grand ball at the Donatis' palace—the same where, six years before, Ronald had quarrelled with the Marchese della Rocca. To the breakfast only the relations and intimate friends of both families had been asked; for the Consul's means were small, and his rooms not very large. To the Donatis' all Portino were invited—at any rate, all the inhabitants of Portino who were qualified for society. Lady Redbourne was present, as a matter of course. Edith had called on her to apologize sweetly for Mr. Lascelles not having invited her to the wedding.

The arrangement suited Alma; for while she would

have been unable to leave the Villa in the morning, as Mrs. Hardy's absence had increased her work, she could easily dispose of her evening; and she appeared at the ball just when it had reached its culminating point. The great handsome suite of rooms, all opening into each other by double doors, was brilliantly decorated; the smooth parquet floors and the huge mirrors reflected the light of hundreds of wax candles. The windows all looked upon a wide balcony or terrace, which was illuminated by many paper lanterns hung from the branches of the orange trees and the cornices of the palazzo. At each end of the terrace was a flight of steps leading down into the garden—a garden which was the admiration of Portino, for it was laid out '*all' Inglese*,' and, though in the very centre of the city, there were winding walks, and bits of turf, and shady shrubberies, and retired benches, and even a croquet lawn. The evening was warm, and the moon's silvery crescent shone in a mid-

summer night's sky. The ball-room windows were soon set open, and even the chilly Italian matrons did not complain of the draught, but only drew their lace mantles a little closer around them.

Lady Redbourne was, as usual, dressed in black; but she had abandoned velvet in favour of satin, and the sombre hue of her dress was relieved by gold cords, which fastened up the flounces, and were cunningly knotted round the sleeves so as to display her statuesque arms. On her head she wore a single rose of the deepest red—a colour which contrasted well with her dark hair, and appeared to bring out still more warmly the warm tone of her complexion. She might well have been an Italian, and even among those southern beauties she would have borne away the palm. But, then, the short nose, slightly tip-tilted, and the arch curve of the lip showed that she was no Roman beauty, while the full form, the rounded arms, and graceful curves of her figure were a pleasing

contrast to the Portinese ladies, who were nearly all either skinny or obese. They felt themselves eclipsed when she swept through the rooms. Even the representatives of the English colony suffered by comparison. Poor Edith, though handsomely dressed in blue silk and white lace, looked colourless and insignificant, while Clara's pure Saxon style became angular, and the two or three winter birds who had remained behind for the ball appeared almost vulgar.

Of course the men eagerly begged Alma for dances; but Ronald had met her at the door, and asked for as many as he dared. The others had to be content to divide the few that remained, and Lady Redbourne gave them one each, so as not to cause any jealousy.

George Stent also presented himself. George was not insensible to female charms, particularly if their possessor was a lady of title. And, besides, he would not be carrying out his programme if he did not take every opportunity of becoming acquainted with the

fascinating American. But George was slow, and not very attractive, so he was relegated to a very distant dance, while Ronald whisked away with his arm round Alma's slender waist. He watched them whirling through the throng, and a grim gleam of pleasure lighted up his fishy eyes.

'I shall catch them out to-night,' he said to himself. 'I won't dance with anyone, so as to have a chance of spotting them.'

Alma was one of those perfect dancers, of whom a man does not meet more than two or three in a lifetime. Gifted with an excellent ear, lithe limbs, and a sound constitution, her little feet were well able to support her, while they always kept time to the music. She never leant unduly on her partner, and yet she submitted herself entirely to his guidance. She was not one of the otherwise excellent dancers who want to steer themselves, and who are therefore often struggling to go one way when their partner wants to

go another. Thoroughly well balanced, her small, classical head slightly inclined, her hand just touching, but not pressing, her partner's shoulder, she floated round the room without an effort. It was not the first time, by very many, that she had danced with Ronald; but probably she had never danced with him on so smooth a floor and in such ample space. The warm colour which mantled her cheek and the sparkle of her dark eyes proved her enjoyment. It was no wonder that after being dragged about the room clumsily by a young member of the English club, after having been dashed across it half-a-dozen times by over-zealous Italians, and after having her toes trodden on by the awkward Danish Consul, who thought himself irresistible, she gladly returned to Ronald's strong arm, even step, and careful guidance.

There could be nothing improper, she thought, in dancing a few times with so old a friend, and one who, besides his other qualifications, was so excellent a

dancer. There could be the less in it that Lady Redbourne took care to talk to Edith whenever she had a respite from the numerous candidates for her hand, and that Ronald himself went back to his wife several times when he was not dancing. Probably Edith did not notice that he danced with no one but Alma.

At supper Lady Redbourne chose a chair at a small table where two seats were already occupied by Edith and her partner, and the party was so merry and seemed to be so unreservedly happy that George Stent, who was, of course, observing matters from a comparatively short distance, began to have serious misgivings.

Perhaps there might, after all, be nothing in it. Perhaps the flirtation of many years ago had matured in a way not at all usual for flirtations, and had become changed into the sound fruit of solid friendship.

To judge by Edith's candid laugh, by Lady Redbourne's frank smile, and by Ronald's sallies, which

seemed to amuse them both equally, any impartial person would have declared that they were all very good friends and nothing more. Very narrowly did these fish-like eyes watch the all-unconscious quartette from the nearest recess; but no lynx could detect any shadow of suspicion in Edith's fair face, nor any covert glance from Alma to Ronald, nor any gleam of any thought but that of honest enjoyment in Ronald's voice. Soon the spy saw that he was wasting his time, and turned his attention to the excellent supper which he had hitherto neglected. But, though baffled, he was not defeated, and would not yet accept so simple a solution of the problem.

Lady Rédbourne was now claimed by an Italian duke, and Ronald accompanied his wife back to the dancing-room. Finding that she was disengaged, he actually danced the next waltz with her—a sight which made the Portinese exclaim, '*Ecco l' amante della sua moglie,*' while Mrs. Lascelles almost shed a tear over

the happiness of her children. Edith also danced well; but since her marriage she had lost her girlish lightness, and there was no poetry of motion in her steps. Still they went round admirably together, and would have gone fairly even if Edith had not been naturally a good dancer; for Ronald was always able to fall into his partner's step, and clumsy girls seemed to move gracefully when he had his arm round their waists.

It was a little attention which charmed Edith, and would have made her quite happy if she had not been thoroughly happy before. She had not enjoyed any ball so much since they were married, and she would at that moment almost have declared that she loved George Stent—the only being for whom in truth she entertained the most entire aversion, because he had come between her and Ronald.

The room was becoming very hot, notwithstanding the open windows; the tiny particles of dust and

starch from the ladies' dresses filled the air, and made it oppressive. The scents of the flowers and the various perfumes added to the closeness. After a soft dreamy waltz, which they had kept up from the beginning to the end, Ronald led his partner out to the terrace, picking up her cloak as he passed her seat, and carefully throwing it over her fair shoulders.

'How delicious it is here,' said Alma.

'Are you sure you will not catch cold?' he inquired.

'Oh no! It is perfectly delightful after that stuffy ball-room.'

'I have never danced with anyone like you!' said Ronald impulsively.

'Hush!' she cried. 'No compliments, please.'

'How well we get on together!' he went on; 'we never stopped all through that waltz, and yet I am not a bit tired. Are you?'

‘No,’ she answered. ‘You dance just as well as ever—better, I think. But it is a relief to get out of that crowded room.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said he. ‘Come and look into the little garden. They are very proud of it, though, of course, it is only a tiny place; but they have laid it out in English fashion, and think so much of it. You will please the signora if you talk of it when you call.’

‘Wait a minute,’ replied Lady Redbourne, holding her card up to catch the light of one of the Chinese lanterns. ‘Let me see to whom I am engaged for the next dance.’ After a pause she added, ‘I cannot make out the man’s name. Can you, Ronald? I don’t want to be rude to these people; they have all been so very kind to me.’

“‘G. S.,”’ exclaimed Ronald. ‘That’s my precious brother-in-law. Never mind him; come along.’

‘I do *not* mind throwing him over in the least,’

said Alma, placing her beautiful arm within his; 'he deserves all the snubbing we can give him.'

They descended the steps into the garden. The moon still shed her silvery beams on the soft scene, casting black shadows from the trees, yet lighting up distant corners almost as brightly as day. They walked silently round the croquet-ground, listening to the strains of music which floated from the house, watching the forms which flitted past the garish light streaming from the windows, and, yielding involuntarily to the soft influence of the Italian night, their hearts beating almost audibly—perhaps from the excitement of the last prolonged dance, Ronald pressed his companion's arm closer to his side. He turned into the shrubbery—into a walk bordered on either side by dense laurels, which almost met over their heads. Only little flashes of moonlight penetrated these recesses, and shone on the path here and there like spots of silver.

Alma's soft breath fanned his cheek. 'Are you tired?' he whispered. A low voice, almost a whisper, seemed commanded in this retired nook.

'Just a little, now,' she answered faintly, her head inclining towards him.

He drew her towards a bench. 'Let us sit down,' he said. 'You want a little rest, after all this dancing.'

How it came about Ronald could not have told, nor Alma; but his arm clasped her waist, and drew her down on the seat beside him, and then naturally, as if it could not have been otherwise, the arm was all at once round her neck, and her soft cheek touched his beard.

'Darling! my only love!' he whispered; and their lips met in a long passionate kiss.

The last strains of the polka died away, and when the music ceased Alma started up.]

'Good heavens!' she cried, 'what would Edith say?

How wicked and vile of me ! She may have seen us. Let us go in at once.'

Ronald rose to his feet, and silently gave her his arm.

'Do not be afraid,' he said. 'No one could possibly see us ; and I certainly will not tell Edith,'

'But I shall be ashamed even to look into her face again ! Oh, Ronald, Ronald, how wretched I am !'

It is a beautiful trait in the really loving woman that, when she errs, she always accuses herself and never her lover. She takes the whole blame on herself : he remains her immaculate lover, even though he may have been in truth by far the more guilty. But this generosity and this faith only last as long as he loves her.

'Dearest Alma,' whispered Ronald, 'blame me, blame our hearts ; do not blame yourself. You have only allowed me to kiss you ; that is nothing very terrible.'

'Oh ! it is so dreadfully treacherous of me ! Come

in at once. I will not remain out a moment longer. And supposing anyone *had* seen us !

‘No one did,’ said he firmly ; and they stepped on the lawn to return to the terrace. But, even as he spoke, his nostrils caught a faint whiff of tobacco. ‘Someone has come here to smoke,’ he thought ; but he did not mention the circumstance, as Alma had not noticed it.

‘When shall I see you again ?’ he whispered, as they ascended the steps.

‘You must not see me again,’ she answered firmly. ‘I am going next week, and to-night it must be good-bye for good !’ Then she moved swiftly into the ball-room.

CHAPTER XLIV.

TWO WARNINGS.

ON the day but one after Teresina's wedding, Ronald rang the bell at the Villa Palmieri at Lady Redbourne's usual tea-hour.

No contrary orders having been given to the servants, he was shown into the boudoir.

Alma was alone. She looked pale and unhappy, but extended her hand to him.

'You ought not to have come. Have you forgotten your wife?'

Ronald did not answer the question.

'The *Laodicea* has arrived,' he said.

'I know. We sail on Tuesday at latest; on Monday night, if she can be got ready.'

‘And to-day is Friday!’ exclaimed Ronald. ‘And you would have had me sit quietly at home and not come near you, when in so short a time we shall be separated for months—perhaps for years.’

‘It must be so,’ said Alma. ‘Surely there is no need for me to tell you that we cannot meet again?’

‘Darling, you cannot undo the past, even if you would!’ he cried, seizing her hand and covering it with kisses.

She withdrew it, although her rising colour betrayed the inward struggle.

‘Do not be so cruel as to remind me of my weakness, Ronald. It is not generous—it is not even manly.’

‘You cannot pretend that you do not love me, Alma! And you are aware that I have struggled for years to stamp out my love for you, and have not succeeded!’

‘Oh, Ronald, pray be calm, and listen!’ said Alma,

imploringly. 'You know how wrong and dreadful all this is! You know that you are committing a cruel sin against your poor wife——'

'I know all that!' he interrupted. 'I know all you would say. Of course, I do not pretend that it is right. But you are not doing Edith any harm. She is a dear, good creature, and I have tried for five long years to love her, and have been a good husband to her, but it is of no use'

'It *must* be of use!' said Alma. 'Poor Edith! How dare you tell me that you love me when you think of her and your sweet children?'

She covered her face with her hands.

Ronald had it on his lips to reply that she had herself allowed him on two separate occasions to do that which she now seemed to consider almost an insult. But he checked himself in time. He felt that it would be brutal to use her weakness as a weapon against her. He was silent for a few moments.

‘Dear Alma!’ he said at last, kneeling down before her, and taking her hands, ‘you are right, of course, and I am wrong and altogether wicked. But it is so terribly difficult to do my duty, and never to see your beautiful face again——’

‘Ronald!’ she interrupted, ‘do you think I have been particularly happy all these years with poor Lord Redbourne?’

‘No, indeed!’ he answered. ‘I know you have suffered more than I have—far more. But it does seem hard, after your suffering and all my struggles, that we should be separated for ever! O God! how can I live, knowing that those dark eyes will never look into mine again, that that smile will be seen by others, and bewitch them, but that *I* shall never see it? Alma, my darling!—my love!—you can bear it, perhaps, because you are stronger and better than I am, and because your love is not so great as mine.’

He relinquished her hands and bent his head, crushed down before her in the agony of his pain.

‘Poor boy!’ she said, gently laying her hand on his curly hair. ‘Poor Ronald! I did not know that it was so bad as all that! You must be strong and brave, and overcome it; and if you cannot get over this wild fancy, you must bear your cross. You are not the only one who has grievous troubles.’ He did not move. After a pause she went on: ‘I have been weak and foolish also—carried away by the impulse of the moment. I repent it bitterly, and I will not do anything to injure your good wife. Ronald, help me to be brave. Do not let me have to fight the battle for both of us. Dear Ronald, recollect I am a weak woman, almost alone in the world, for I cannot count my husband as a protector.’

He rose to his feet. There were tears in his eyes—bitter tears which nothing short of the agony of his

soul could have made him shed. In a hopeless, dejected tone he said :

‘I will do my best, Alma. Do you mean that we are to part like this?’

‘We must, Ronald. It is our duty.’

‘I never hated duty so much as I do now!’ he exclaimed, desperately. ‘I love you so that I feel I would give not my life alone, but my very soul, for your sake, and I am coldly reminded of my duty! Will you run away with me, darling, and forget the whole world with me?’

Alma was gradually becoming exhausted with the struggle. She had nerved herself to it, and had fought valiantly, speaking in as calm a voice as she could muster, and bravely trampling on her own feelings. But she was getting tired, and her nerves threatened to give way altogether. She had still strength enough to rise. In a weak voice she said:

‘Ronald, I thought better of you. I must not stop to listen to you any more.’

She moved towards the door.

‘Stay!’ he cried. ‘One moment. I will be calm, and do all you wish. I will never give way in this manner again; I am ashamed of myself! Forgive me.’

She gave him her hand.

‘Good-bye,’ she whispered.

He kissed it.

‘Alma, dear, grant me one last request,’ he said imploringly, in a tone soft and tender and persuasive. ‘Let me see you once again before you go!’

‘It is better not,’ she answered.

‘Once only—for the very last time!’ he went on. ‘I will obey you entirely if you will only meet me once more.’

‘Well, I ought not,’ she again said.

‘Surely it is no crime to take leave of an old friend

whom you will probably never see again,' urged Ronald. 'Let me see you on Monday.'

'Lord Redbourne will go on board on Monday, and the servants will be moving our things, and everything in a mess. You cannot come here.'

'All the better!' exclaimed he. 'Let me drive you out to Bagnuoli on Monday afternoon. You have never been there, and you ought not to leave Portino without seeing it.'

'What would Edith say?' asked Lady Redbourne, weakening.

'She would not mind, even if she knew it,' answered Ronald. 'I will call for you at three o'clock, and we shall be back by half-past six.'

'Mind,' said Alma, unable to resist, 'I must be on board before dark.'

'Oh yes, I will take care of that,' he answered, kissing her hand. 'You will be quite safe. You may trust me.'

Perhaps Ronald would have kissed her lips; but saying, 'I feel that I ought not, but I cannot help it. Good-bye for to-day,' Alma slipped out of the room.

Ronald descended the stairs slowly, and with bowed head turned on his homeward way. Perhaps, even if he had walked erect, and looked round, he would not have noticed a figure almost entirely concealed behind the oleanders, of which clumps dotted the garden. When his retreating steps were no longer heard, a head was cautiously popped out from the screen of a shrub, and quickly withdrawn, as two of the servants were standing under the portico. By-and-by they had finished their airing and their talk, and the door closed. Then the head reappeared, and, seeing that the coast was clear, was soon followed by a body. The person to whom body and head belonged dodged carefully from one clump of oleanders to the next, till the gate was reached, when it turned bravely and walked up the straight drive to the door, and

rang the bell. In answer to the visitor's inquiry for Lady Redbourne, the servant replied that her ladyship was not well enough to receive.

'Now,' said George Stent to himself, after he had delivered half a pack of cards, 'if anything comes of this, they will not be able to say that I was spying. I called here in open day, and left my card. It happened that I saw Ronald go in an hour back, and I waited for him to come out. That was all. Of course they are as thick as thieves. Anybody but that little fool Edith would have found it out ages ago. Now what must be the next move?'

And Mr. Stent walked slowly towards the town, avoiding the broad Marina, which was full of people, and seeking out quiet byways where he could weigh pro's and con.'s in his mind without fear of interruption. When he was near the Consulate, he turned to the right, through some of the narrowest and least cleanly streets of the old town. After pursuing a

devious course, he stopped before a small shop, where a few packets of steel pens, some poor engravings of the Virgin and the Saints, a large quantity of beads and crosses, and various dirty little pamphlets decorated the tiny window. He looked at the place carefully. 'This will do,' thought he.

Entering the shop, he asked, in the best Italian he could muster, for pens, paper, and envelopes. They were supplied, and, to the astonishment of the old woman who kept the establishment, the signore did not offer her one-half of what she asked, but paid her about six times the value of the wretched articles without demur, and departed.

George Stent walked home by another circuitous route, and proceeded at once to his dressing-room, where he sat down to write on the bad paper he had just purchased. Most people take off their gloves before writing a letter, but he did exactly the reverse. He turned over several pair, and selected the newest

and tightest. Gloving his right hand, he buttoned it carefully, so that the hand was cramped and stiff. He then wrote two letters, enclosed them in envelopes, and wrapped up the pens in what remained of the paper. He stuck a five-centime stamp on each letter, being careful to affix the stamp in the left-hand corner all awry. Then he descended the stairs, and walked round the corner to the nearest letter-box, dropping his parcel over the wall of the Marina by the way.

Next morning Ronald was in the dining-room before Edith, and was reading the newspaper when she entered, and, having made the tea, proceeded to open her letters. Suddenly she uttered a cry, and turned pale.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Ronald, looking up.

‘Nothing, dear,’ answered Edith, with an effort.

‘Tell me, Edith! There must have been something to frighten you.’

‘I was startled for a minute ; but it is nothing,’ she replied.

‘What startled you ? Something in your letter ?’

‘No—that is, yes,’ said Edith hesitatingly. ‘I was a little surprised ; that is all.’

‘A wretched begging letter, I am sure, with a horrible tale of woe which does not exist ? I thought I saw a suspicious scrawl lying on the table.’

‘Yes,’ answered she, seizing the suggestion, ‘a nasty, sickening, begging letter. I won’t think any more about it.’

‘Don’t,’ said Ronald, approvingly. ‘I never let these stories affect me ; I know my Portinese too well. They are wonderful people at fiction.’

‘Is it always fiction ?’ asked Edith.

‘In nineteen cases out of twenty. But pass me the letter, and I will tell you what I think about it.’

‘No,’ said Edith, tearing it into little pieces ; ‘it is

too horrid. I won't think about it myself, and I had rather *you* did not.'

'Very well,' assented Ronald, not attaching the slightest importance to the matter. 'By all means treat it with silent contempt.'

Edith had torn up the letter, but it was not easy to dismiss its contents from her mind. They were as follows, written in very bad Italian, which she had been too agitated to examine closely, so that she attributed the bad grammar and spelling rather to an ignorant native than to an educated man writing in a foreign tongue:

'Keep your eyes on your husband! Do you not see that he is madly in love with the beautiful American lady?

'A FRIEND.'

Anonymous letters are, of course, despicable weapons, of which no one should take any notice.

But, though the weapons be despicable, they sometimes inflict a severe wound ; and, argue with herself as she would, Edith could not treat these lines with the contempt they deserved. There might be no foundation for the statement made ; but it was evident that Ronald's attentions to Lady Redbourne must have attracted some notice in Portino for any one, however wicked and slanderous, to make the statement at all. And she could not forget that her husband had once been really in love with the beautiful peeress—not perhaps madly, but sufficiently to rave about her in his delirium, and to call for her in the wanderings of his uncontrolled mind. Possibly the love had grown up again, and she had taken a serpent to her bosom when she received this woman as her friend. She resolved to be watchful, though she reproached herself for the resolve, and felt shabby and mean about it.

Summoning all her self-control, she spoke to her husband in a perfectly calm voice :

‘Do you know when Lady Redbourne leaves, dear?’

Ronald was taken by surprise, because he, too, had been at that moment thinking of Lady Redbourne, and wondering whether he could not manage to see her some time during the day, if it were only for a minute. He was a very bad hypocrite, and could not repress a slight flush as he answered hesitatingly :

‘I believe the yacht is to sail on Monday or Tuesday.’

‘Then I will call to-day to bid her good-bye,’ said Edith, still looking at him, and herself feeling quite as guilty as he did, only from very different motives.

‘Very well, dear,’ replied Ronald, mentally deciding that he would not call till after his wife, if he called at all—a matter on which he had not yet made up his mind.

That the morning was not quite a happy one for

either, may well be assumed. Edith was full of fears and suspicions which she was ashamed of confessing even to herself; while Ronald was tortured with self-reproaches which he dismissed only by telling himself that the fair enchantress would be gone in three days, and that then he would endeavour to forget her. As long as she was at Portino she acted on him like a magnet on steel: he could not keep away from her. He went to the shops where he thought it likely that she would make some last purchases, and, failing to find her, he stood smoking a cigarette under the portico of the Casino Nobile—a most unusual lounge for Ronald, and one he selected only in the hope that he might see Lady Redbourne's carriage. Here also he was disappointed; but on walking back he caught sight of the well-known livery. The carriage was turning out of the *porte cochère* of the Palazzo Woodall. He crossed the piazza rapidly, and held up his hand to the coachman, who at once pulled up. As the

carriage stopped, a rough lazzarone in tattered garments, who had been having a ride behind, stepped off and approached him.

‘I have been calling on Edith to say good-bye,’ said Lady Redbourne, shaking hands, while Ronald waved off with his left the importunate fellow who was soliciting alms.

‘She has driven round to the Villa for the same purpose,’ he answered. ‘She will be sorry to have missed you ; but I am so glad. I was wondering how I should possibly see you to-day !’

‘You will have to do many days without seeing me,’ said Alma, smiling rather sadly.

‘Indeed I know it only too well. I cannot imagine how I shall live at all. *Ecco, ma va via subito,*’ he added, tossing the beggar a half-franc piece.

The man thanked him and walked off ; but he did not go far—only to the arcade on the opposite side of

the piazza. Here he curled himself up in the sun, and kept his black beady eyes steadily fixed on the carriage.

‘You will get on somehow, Ronald,’ said Lady Redbourne. ‘You *must* get on; you must not think of me again after next Monday.’

‘It is all very well to say I must not,’ he replied. ‘But I cannot help it. Your smile is everything to me now. I almost feel as if I could well exist without food altogether, if I could only see you for five minutes daily.’

Alma laughed. ‘You would not stand that allowance long!’ she said.

‘No; of course our wretched bodies are always in the way. But all my sunshine will be gone when the *Laodicea* sails, Alma.’

‘It will come back, Ronald. It must surely come back, if you do your duty to Edith. But you must not stand talking to me here, for all Portino to stare

at us. Please tell the coachman to drive on to Donati's.'

Ronald clasped her hand, but he did not give the order.

'I cannot wait till Monday,' he said, 'knowing that Monday will be the last time. I shall come into your garden to-night, towards nine. I shall hope to see you.'

'Don't, Ronald dear!' she exclaimed. 'The servants or some one will be sure to catch sight of you; and, besides, think of Edith.'

'Nobody shall see me,' replied he, taking no notice of her last remark; 'and if you do not come out, I shall have the satisfaction, at any rate, of seeing your shadow flit across the window. Alma!' he cried, warmly, 'you do not know what it is to love as I do.'

'Go now—go at once,' she said, 'or I will not meet you on Monday.'

Ronald fell back, raised his hat, and the carriage

rolled away. The beggar under the arcade uncurled himself and swiftly sneaked along the houses. Ronald did not see him, for his eyes were fixed on the retreating carriage. When it had swept round the corner, he turned into the house with a deep sigh.

CHAPTER XLV.

LORD REDBOURNE AT HOME.

LORD REDBOURNE often had very disreputable people to visit him at the Villa Palmieri, but he had never had such queer company as on this Saturday. The morning's letters were always brought to his lordship in bed, and to-day was no exception to the rule. Dr. Allen was in the habit of coming in with the chocolate to inquire after the invalid, and was generally requested to stop and read some of the letters to him. But when the doctor came in to-day, he was abruptly dismissed, and Lord Redbourne had a long conference with his valet. The valet then went off into the town, saying that he had been sent on an errand.

An hour later a certain Cimari appeared—a gentleman who had come over occasionally before with other persons of both sexes and of more than doubtful reputation. Dr. Allen knew the man as a gamester without means—a creature who was employed in every possible capacity except an honourable one. In former times there were many such in Portino; even now there are still some left. He was an advocate by profession, but had lost the right to appear before the courts in consequence of some disgraceful transaction or other. He kept what he termed an agency—an establishment where he gave legal or illegal advice to people not much better and only more ignorant than himself. He knew all the usurers in Portino, and was occasionally sought for in the small hours of the morning by youths who had lost more than they could pay at the Casino, and wanted a loan in a hurry. He had no money himself, but could find it, on terms, when he chose to try.

When he discovered a pigeon, he was not above teaching him *écarté*, and haunted the fashionable *cafés* for the purpose. At a pinch, when business was bad, he would write petitions to Government for fifty centimes each, or begging letters for less money. Anything was fish that came to his net, and, as he was always fairly well dressed and knew how to put on the manners of a gentleman, he was seldom reduced to inactivity from want of work. Almost as soon as Lord Redbourne had taken the Villa, he had had the audacity to send in his card and offer his services ‘for anything his lordship required.’ To-day his lordship *did* require him, and the Cavaliere Cimari descended the broad steps of the Villa with a smile on his face. Seldom had he made so good a *coup* as to-day.

Soon after his departure Lord Redbourne sent for his doctor, and, after some conversation on the subject of his health, remarked that he wished to engage

a couple of Italians for the *Laodicea*, and had told Cimari to look for some.

‘But surely your English crew is sufficient, my lord?’ observed Allen.

‘I want to cruise about a little in Sicilian waters,’ he replied. ‘It will not hurt me, will it, Allen?’

‘I should think not,’ replied the doctor.

‘That is what I wanted to ask you,’ continued Lord Redbourne. ‘I don’t wish to sail home at once. It’s too early to go to any French seaside place yet, and you say I must not stop in London.’

‘Certainly not,’ said Allen.

‘So you all say, and I believe you’re all fools,’ remarked his lordship politely. ‘But I cannot do without you, worse luck.’

‘You know you are never well in London, my lord.’

‘Oh, I know—I know. Anyhow, I’m not wanting to go there just now. What do you think of a trip

over to Palermo, and going to see the Lipari Islands ? They say they're very curious.'

'I think it would be a charming idea,' said Allen, much surprised that Lord Redbourne, who never cared about the beauties of nature, should suddenly suggest a cruise on which he would certainly not meet the lively company of which he was so very fond.

'Exactly,' continued he. 'Well, Osborne knows nothing of that part of the world, so I want a couple of fellows as pilots, and I've sent for them.'

'I should not have thought that Cimari was quite the man to find trustworthy seamen,' suggested Allen.

'Oh, he knows everything and everybody. Don't be afraid of your precious carcass, Allen. They could not drown us without drowning themselves, you know. Cimari won't choose idiots.'

'I hope not,' said Allen.

At that moment the valet entered.

‘There are two rough-looking men outside, my lord, who wish to speak to you.’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Lord Redbourne, ‘Cimari has not been long. Show them in, George — show them in.’

‘They are very queer customers, my lord—all in rags, if I may take the liberty of saying so.’

‘Confound you, show them in, I say! You don’t expect Italian sailors to walk about in my best coats, like you do, do you?’

This was cruel to George, who never wore his master’s coats till they were discarded by his lordship. So he marched the two men into the room, which they entered with their red caps in their hands, bowing almost to the ground. One was a man of about forty, with a thick dark beard slightly silvered, a mass of black hair matted together on his large head, bushy eyebrows, and black bead-like eyes under

them. This was the most ragged of the two. It would have been impossible to say what was the nature of his garment. The other, whose clothes still held together, was a younger man, with an almost smooth face. He was very slightly built, had a long thin nose, narrow eyes, and a retreating forehead. Dr. Allen stared at them. They did not look like decent seafaring men at all; still less like efficient pilots.

‘Cut away, Allen, and go and look after your beastly drugs,’ said his lordship. ‘Hi!’ he exclaimed, before the doctor closed the door, ‘bring some pastilles, or some stuff to burn while these beggars are here. They don’t exactly smell nice.’

Allen obeyed wonderingly, and retired. Why on earth should Lord Redbourne wish to engage the men himself, and talk to them in private, instead of leaving it all to Osborne, his sailing-master? Perhaps because Osborne knew little of Italian, while his

lordship was a perfect master of the language. But, then, why turn him, the confidential doctor, out of the room? He could only shrug his shoulders and go for a walk.

That evening, at dinner, his lordship made himself particularly agreeable. He was a man who, in his long and dissipated life, had seen much of the world, and still remembered much of what he had seen. When he liked, and when he could keep his temper under control, he could be extremely amusing. Before they were married Alma had only seen him at his best. She knew he was getting old, and that his health was not strong; but she had not regarded him with any special aversion, and had had no idea of his temper nor of his tastes. Had it been otherwise, she would not have married him even under compulsion. To-night, almost for the first time for six years, Lord Redbourne talked very pleasantly, in a lively and entertaining manner, telling her anecdotes, some

of which were perhaps rather highly spiced, but which Alma was willing enough to hear instead of the usual growlings, grumblings, and oaths. He asked about the friends she had made at Portino, and regretted that his health had not enabled him to go to the great ball at Donati's, of which he had heard so much.

'But,' he added, 'thanks to our good doctor here'—this with a gracious gesture to Allen—'I am so much better, that next winter I really hope to go out a little again in society.'

Allen was surprised. But when the old invalid went on to say, 'It will be a proud moment for me to be able to enter a crowded room with *you* on my arm, Alma,' and accompanied this polite speech with a suave smile, his wife's surprise was as great as the doctor's.

When dinner was over, Lord Redbourne said :

'Allen, do you think it would hurt me to smoke

a cigarette in her ladyship's sitting-room, instead of going upstairs as usual ?

‘ Certainly not, my lord.’

‘ Well, then, my dear,’ he continued, rising from the table, on which he was obliged to rest both hands, ‘ if you will give me your arm to-night I will go into the drawing-room.’

Of course, Lady Redbourne came to his side at once. He always left the table with the doctor's help. He had not asked her for her arm for years. He now clutched it so violently that she almost shrieked with pain. Limping along the wide, marble-paved passage, he looked up into her face.

‘ You did not expect the old man to walk about again like this, did you ?’ he asked.

‘ I am very glad,’ muttered Alma.

‘ So am I—very,’ he answered in a hard tone. ‘ I am lame, but I'm not quite blind yet—not quite blind.’

The invalid was made comfortable in the drawing-

room, which he had not entered once since they occupied the Villa. He continued to converse on indifferent subjects.

‘We shall be on board on Monday,’ he said, after a time.

‘I suppose so,’ answered Alma, not knowing what else to say.

‘You will be sorry to leave this place, I suppose?’ he asked, looking at her again sharply.

‘Not particularly,’ she replied. ‘Everyone is going away now.’

‘Yes; getting too d—d hot!’ he said, as if for getting himself. ‘Too hot for you and me, anyhow,’ he added significantly.

What on earth was his object? He evidently had some hidden meaning or other, but Alma could not make out what it was.

‘Have you an English paper here?’ asked Lord Redbourne.

‘Yes. There is the *Times*, and the *Illustrated*, and *Truth*,’ she replied.

‘*Truth*? Ah, read me the gossip part of *Truth*,’ he said. ‘I like it.’

She obeyed at once. At that moment the clock struck nine. She began to read as steadily as she could, but her eyes wandered towards the open window, against her will, into the moonlit garden beyond. She read on and on, and every time she made a pause between the paragraphs she fancied she could see a dim figure moving about among the oleander bushes outside. Ronald would be there, waiting for some sign from her, and she was tied to the invalid’s chair. She began stumbling and making mistakes. She now felt sure that she heard footsteps on the path. Her nervousness increased till she could hardly see the printed words. Would Lord Redbourne not go to sleep, or return to his room, as usual? No. He was quite wide awake, and appeared

to be listening attentively. His cold grey eyes were fixed on her, and she positively shivered under their gaze. Again she heard the footsteps, and this time they appeared to approach the window. She could stand it no longer.

‘I beg your pardon, Redbourne!’ she suddenly exclaimed. ‘Excuse me for a moment.’

She threw down the paper and darted from the room. Passing swiftly across the hall, she entered a small anteroom, of which the windows also looked towards the garden, but not on the same side as those of the drawing-room. She tore it open, and ran across the grass to the other side. Ronald saw the white figure flying along, and, emerging from the sheltering shade of an oleander, caught her in his arms.

She pushed him back as he kissed her.

‘Go at once!’ she whispered. ‘He is in the drawing-room, and can see and hear everything.’

‘He! Who?’ asked Ronald, astonished.

‘My husband. He has taken a fancy to stop downstairs to-night. Go at once. I heard your steps on the path distinctly.’

‘Why, I have never left this bush,’ said Ronald, in a low voice.

‘Then I suppose it must have been fancy. I thought I heard footsteps distinctly several times. But you must go. I cannot stop a moment. Only think, if you were seen here at this hour of the night!’

‘Then good-night, sweet,’ he whispered, pressing his lips to hers. ‘Remember Monday afternoon!’

‘If Lord Redbourne goes on board, as he says,’ she answered; ‘not otherwise. Now go.’

‘I hope he will. I will have the carriage in the Via Carretina at three.’

‘Go—go!’ repeated Alma hastily. ‘Good-night.’

Then she flew back the way she had come.

When she returned to the drawing-room, with

beating heart and heaving bosom, Lord Redbourne asked in a gentle voice, which was not in harmony with the sharp glance of his steel-grey eyes :

‘What was the matter, Alma? You seem excited.’

‘I—I felt rather faint,’ stammered she. ‘I had to go to my room.’

‘I am sorry to hear it. No doubt it is getting hot in this place—very hot. Mrs. Hardy was wise to go, but I wish she were here now. You had better see Allen, my dear.’

‘Please no,’ answered Alma, blushing scarlet. ‘It is passing off. I shall be all right directly.’

‘Ring the bell, please ; I am tired.’

She did so, and the doctor was summoned to help his lordship upstairs. But he insisted on Alma retiring first.

‘Lady Redbourne has had a strange sort of attack,’ he said to Allen. ‘I think Portino does not quite

agree with her. Give her some sal-volatile, or something, and see her safely into her room.'

Notwithstanding her protestations, she had to comply with these directions. Upstairs she said to Allen :

'What is the matter with Lord Redbourne? I have never seen him like this before.'

'Nor have I,' answered Allen. 'In health he seems really better. But I cannot make out his conduct. Just now he was cursing and swearing at Mrs. Hardy for going away at the wrong hour.'

'His amiability to me is beyond my comprehension,' said Alma, with a bitter smile.

'See the house properly locked up, Allen,' said his lordship, when Allen returned to him and reported that Lady Redbourne was quite well and retiring to rest. 'Every window must be barred, and every shutter closed. There are often suspicious characters about this place at night.'

Ronald walked slowly from the garden, keeping as much as he could behind the shrubs and trees. He looked back occasionally. Once he fancied that he saw a shadow moving close by his side, and turned sharply. But it disappeared before he could make it out. Then, again, he thought he heard a footstep. But this, too, must have been fancy, for the garden lay entirely deserted in the bright moonlight.

CHAPTER XLVI.

BAGNUOLI.

THERE was a family party at the Consulate on the Sunday evening. The George Stents were to leave on a tour to the north of Italy next day, and soon Ronald and his wife would move to Bagnuoli. Though she had just parted from her younger daughter, and her eldest would not remain long with her, Mrs. Lascelles was perfectly happy and in excellent spirits. For Teresina had only gone away for a short time, and would soon be back amongst them with the man of her choice; Clara was quietly contented, and still as much attached to her unattractive husband as when they were first married; Ronald, her first-born

and undoubtedly her favourite, was respected and prosperous, living close to her, and fortunate in the possession of the most perfect woman—according to Mrs. Lascelles' views—in the whole world. She felt, not without pride, that much of the family felicity was, under Providence, due to her own exertions. She had not, indeed, tried to catch George Stent for her eldest daughter, but she had discerned what she considered his sterling qualities under his yellow skin and fishy eyes, and had done all she could, in a quiet and unobtrusive way, to induce Clara to forget his want of beauty and think only of his affection for her and his excellent position. In this she had had no difficulty ; but she had worked infinitely harder, as the reader knows, to effect the alliance between the houses of Woodall and Lascelles, and her reward was greater in proportion. To-night she could not look at those two without feeling her eyes moisten with joy at their happiness, and satisfaction that she had

created it. Yet on this Sunday evening there was nothing in the appearance of either Ronald or Edith to make pleasurable emotions justifiable—except in a fond mother who looked at her children through rose-coloured spectacles. Edith was pale and silent ; Ronald fidgety and *distract*. George Stent was watching them both, gratified to see that his shot had told, but anxious to be back in his own house, protected by his clan, before the explosion which he thought was imminent. Like other conspirators, he did not mind charging the mine and laying the train, but he preferred getting out of the way before the concern went off. Therefore, he was very determined to start the next morning, and resisted Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles' urgent requests to stay a few days longer, by pleading pressing business in Venice.

Probably, if Ronald had not been so much occupied by his own thoughts and his own conscience, he would have noticed his wife's taciturnity and her

depression. But his mind and heart were entirely absorbed in Lady Redbourne. He was perfectly aware of the wrong he was committing, and did not for a moment deceive himself into thinking it right. But he found innumerable extenuating circumstances which made his conduct excusable. Lady Redbourne's great generosity during the crisis, his own love for her which dated so far back, her imminent departure and the probability that they would never meet again, his long struggles against the passion which devoured him, and his years of fidelity to the wife whom he respected and admired without loving—all contributed to make him consider that, after all, it was a very venial offence to meet Alma for a couple of hours, to exchange a few loving words, and to lay up a tiny store of consolation, a sweet memory to look back upon, for the many weary years of separation which must follow.

Edith simply hoped for the best, without being able

to trust. She would have been ashamed to take the slightest action on the anonymous letter she had received, and she knew of nothing to corroborate the statement it contained, except Ronald's evident unhappiness. A sickening fear seized her once or twice that they might be planning an elopement, and that the warning was a genuine one from some friend who wished her to prevent it. But how could she? Nay, more, if Ronald desired to leave her, would she prevent it if she could? But for the two little children, she would have said 'No!' at once. Her pride came to her aid. Though the future without her husband might be a dull, dreary blank, a desert without an oasis, and only death at the other side, yet she felt that if he were miserable with her, she would not try to keep him by her side. And again she was ashamed. Could five years of a blameless life be thus wiped off by a wretched anonymous scrawl? Was it not disgraceful even to suspect him? She had had

fears and suspicions before, and they had proved unfounded. Ronald had lived and worked and striven for her and her children only. If his heart had strayed against his will, how could she blame him? He had not followed its dictates, but had been faithful through all to duty and to her. Why should she suppose that he would now throw everything over which had been holy to him for so many years? It was a gross injustice to him even to think of such a possibility.

She raised her eyes at this moment and met George Stent's fishy gaze riveted on her. He instantly looked in another direction, and a slight colour rose to his yellow cheeks at having been detected in watching her. That flush was an inspiration. It gave Edith the key to the riddle. How silly of her not to have seen it before! Of course, the whole was a malicious trick of her brother-in-law. It had not struck her hitherto. She was too good and pure to suppose that

one on whom Ronald had conferred an incalculable benefit should repay it by spiteful wickedness. And even now it seemed impossible, almost absurd. But women jump to conclusions very rapidly. Often the conclusions appear to be based on totally insufficient premisses, but are held fast through thick and thin, and turn out to be right in the end. On this Sunday evening Edith would willingly have gone into the witness-box and sworn that George Stent had written that anonymous letter. She had not recognised the hand-writing: there was no apparent motive for it; on the contrary, the motives ought to have been all the other way. Yet she felt sure of her case, and relieved in proportion. She smiled again, and went to the piano and played an accompaniment for her father-in-law, who occasionally tried his family and his friends by fancy performances on the violin. But when they all rose to go, and George held out his hand to her at the door, she gave him a withering

glance of contempt and swept past him without the slightest acknowledgment. He stood in the doorway, his hand still outstretched, staring after her, while Ronald was cloaking her in the hall.

At three o'clock next day a neat little brougham, with a pair of well-bred chestnuts pawing, and shaking their heads, was waiting in the quiet Via Carretina, one of the stony, steep streets which lead from the southern suburbs of Portino towards the hills. It is a thoroughfare not much frequented, except in the early mornings by a few peasants bringing their produce to sell to the dwellers in the villas along the shore. It is crooked, and paved with very rough, uneven stones; it runs between white walls, interrupted here and there by flights of steps leading down to a villa. The carriage was opposite one of these flights, and at the foot of the stairs was Ronald, waiting exactly opposite the gate of the Villa Palmieri. In the morning Dr. Allen had come to the Bank to take leave, and had

told Ronald that Lord Redbourne was going on board at once, and would probably sail the next morning at sunrise. So he knew that there would be no one to hinder Alma from keeping her tryst, and waited patiently. Soon his heart gave a great bound, as a tall, graceful figure, clad in some soft grey stuff, appeared in the gateway. He rushed out of his hiding-place with outstretched hands.

‘Foolish boy!’ said Alma, with her sweet smile. ‘I ought not to have come. It is very wrong and very silly. Let me go back.’

‘No, indeed, darling,’ answered he, as he took her arm and placed it within his own, leading her up the steep steps. ‘I cannot let you go now.’

‘I am frightened,’ said she. ‘Lord Redbourne alarmed me on Saturday. I cannot help thinking that he is watching us—that he suspects something.’

‘Nonsense, dear!’ exclaimed Ronald. ‘He has left

you to do as you please for six years, and he is not likely to begin worrying now. Besides, we are doing no harm.'

'Oh, Ronald, that is all very well, but you know that we are. You know that it is quite wicked to meet in this way, and be afraid of your wife and my husband.'

He did not reply, but opened the carriage-door, which they had by that time reached. A ragged man, with a thick black beard, was lying almost under the carriage. Ronald did not notice him.

'I am so glad you have brought the brougham,' said Alma. 'I was afraid it would be the open carriage, and then all Portino would have known it, and Edith would hate and despise me.'

'No one shall know it, dearest—though, indeed, there is nothing to be ashamed of. You need not be anxious about Edith. I am more careful of her happiness than I am of my own. She shall hear

nothing, nor see nor know anything, to disturb her.'

'I know you are good to her in every respect except one,' said Alma.

'How can I command my heart, Alma? I have fought with it for years; I have struggled and tried my best to forget you.'

'You spoiled everything last week at M. Donati's,' said she.

'Spoilt? No! Because at last my love overflowed the banks of propriety, and because I told you what you must have known well already?'

'Indeed, I was not so conceited, dear!' interrupted Alma. 'I did not think you cared about me more than as a pleasant, nice friend.'

'My love! why, my life and my soul have always been yours!' exclaimed Ronald. 'Surely, you could not suppose I had forgotten you?—*you*, the most beautiful woman that has ever been created! Your

face, your eyes, your sweet mouth have ever been before me, night and day ; and if I have driven the visions away by hard work, they have returned again at the first opportunity.'

Her head dropped on his shoulders, and his arm encircled her waist.

'It is very sweet to be loved like that,' she murmured ; 'but it is so wicked !'

'I cannot help it, darling,' said Ronald, kissing her lips. 'Your years of misery with that old man, my long years of battle with myself, surely deserve some reward.'

'It is a hard life. But we have no right to this joy of being together, nor to seek our reward in this way. I did not intend to come. I made up my mind to be strong and to resist. If Redbourne had not gone off so early, I am sure I should have made no effort. But when he and the Doctor went, and the maids were busy with packing, I had nothing to do, so—I came.'

‘I am very glad you did,’ replied he warmly. ‘If you had not come, I think I should have walked into the Villa and fetched you.’

‘That would have been very foolish, Ronald ; for I tell you I am sure my husband suspects something, and is watching us.’

He attempted to show her the unreasonableness of this idea, but in vain. She had made up her mind about it, much as Edith had made up her mind about the authorship of the anonymous letter, on very insufficient evidence, or, rather, on none at all. Then they spoke of other things, and their own love, and the future to which Alma endeavoured to reconcile him. Of course, she was entirely inconsistent and illogical. She knew that it was utterly wrong to drive out with him, to let him kiss her and pet her and adore her ; and she preached to him, oh ! so earnestly about his duties to his wife and his children, and how he must learn to love Edith, and how the first step was to love

no one else, and to forget her immediately, and how he was neglecting every duty and breaking the laws of God and man by his present conduct. And he heard and did not contradict, but let the words go in at one ear and out at the other ; while he gazed into her dark eyes, and watched the varying curves of her full lips, and the veins visible under the pellucid skin of her temples, and the long eyelashes sweeping the soft cheek, and the pure outline of that short nose, and the graceful turn of her neck, firm and white as ivory.

They heeded but little the beauties of the road, the gardens all resplendent with roses, the banks covered with anemones and wild hyacinths, the woods bursting into fresh green. Long before they had said half or a quarter of what was in their hearts to say, they rattled over the stones of Bagnuoli, and soon the carriage stopped before the Albergo Grande—the ‘Star and Garter’ of the Italian village. It

was early in the season for visitors, but Ronald had been careful not to take the hotel folks by surprise. In a room open to the terrace, overhanging a steep precipice which fell down sheer to the river Manione, now swollen by the melting snow of the Apennines, tumbling and brawling in its rocky bed, was laid a cold collation — chicken, salad, cakes, sweets, and, most attractive of all, a huge basket of fragrant wood-strawberries, picked on the sunniest slopes of warm Monte Celino.

From the tiny hotel, perched a thousand feet above the sea, an enchanting view met Alma's delighted eyes. Under them the narrow gorge and the foaming Manione; beyond it, on the left, a wooded hill crowned with the grey ruins of an old robber's castle; in the background, the purple slopes of higher mountains; and further away still, snowy peaks glistening in the sunshine. On the right, far below them, white villas, and walls, and green gardens, and the terraced houses

of Portino seven miles away. Then the blue sea glittering and sparkling, dotted here and there with the dark shadows of the islands and tiny white specks of sails ; over all a May sky—a sky of intense deep blue, and an atmosphere full of warm tremulous sunshine.

Ronald filled her a goblet of sparkling Asti, and threw himself on the floor at her feet while she sipped the perfumed wine, and drank in the beauty of the scene with her eyes.

‘It would never have done to leave Portino without coming here, would it, dear?’ he asked.

‘No, indeed,’ she exclaimed, stroking his curly head. ‘I am glad you brought me. What a wonderful view!’

Meanwhile, down in the garden, a ragged creature, with a red nightcap, a dark beard, and black bead-like eyes, called for a fiasco of the best Falernian and something to eat, to be brought into one of the many tiny arbours constructed for the convenience of the

Portinese who wished to escape the heat of the city for a few hours.

The waiter hesitated to obey. The new-comer did not look worth four bajocchi, and, therefore, certainly not capable of paying for a fiasco of their best wine. He summoned the landlord, who came up with a swagger, and told the intruder that the Albergo Grande was not for such as him: he had better go down to the *trattoria*, round the corner.

The man laughed.

'*Davvero*,' he said; 'my dress is not much. *Ha ragione. Ecco!*' With these words he tossed a silver five-franc piece on the table, and added, 'Now make haste. I am thirsty.'

Of course his orders were at once obeyed. He was a good-natured man, too—one who understood manners, though his clothes were torn and dusty. For when the landlord himself brought the fiasco, he invited him to join in drinking it, and began to chat

amicably. They talked of the prospects of the wine crop, which was showing famous signs of bloom, of the coming summer, of the chances of a good season, and of various other interesting matters.

‘And those beautiful little birds there who came in that pretty carriage,’ said the stranger, when they had become intimate, ‘will they remain long with you?’

He bent his head significantly towards the terrace.

‘Oh no!’ replied the landlord: ‘the *cavaliere* has ordered some English tea for five o’clock, and then they return to Portino.’

‘Noble *ferestieri*?’ inquired the stranger.

The landlord stooped forward to whisper:

‘The *giovane* is the rich banker of Portino. We know him very well. As to the lady,’ and he shrugged his shoulders, ‘it is not his wife. The *signora* is a strange English lady. But, after all, what have *noi altri* to say if the gentleman likes to divert himself? It is not any concern of ours.’

'Of course not,' assented the other. 'Now, *padrone*, I must be off. I have a long way to travel yet. *A rivederla.*'

They shook hands like old friends, and the ragged lazzarone trudged down the Portino road.

Two hours later, when the sun was declining and the dark shadows were swiftly creeping up from the valleys to the opposite hillsides, Ronald and Alma started on their return journey. They had delayed far longer than she had originally intended. Two people who love each other, and are about to part for years, are not watchful of time, nor anxious to hurry on the hour of separation.

'It is getting very late,' said Alma, anxiously, as she looked at the darkening woods; 'the sun has set.'

'And the sun of my life will set in less than an hour,' sighed Ronald. 'All that is most precious will sail in the *Laodicea.*'

'Do not make it harder for me than it is, Ronald

dear,' said she, laying her hand in his. 'Do you not know what a battle I have to fight with my heart?'

'I wish you would give it up, and be beaten,' he answered.

'No, my love, you do not wish that. You would, I am sure, love me far less if I were to neglect my duty, and to allow you to forget your wife.'

'Indeed not!' he exclaimed. 'I cannot ask you to sacrifice everything for me—everything that makes life at all possible for a woman. That I cannot do, because I know that the punishment would be too dreadful for you to bear, and for me to witness. But——'

'You see we are agreed! There is nothing for us but to separate for ever, and forget each other—if we can.'

'It is too horrible!' cried he, in agony. 'I cannot contemplate the possibility. Perhaps it does not seem so dreadful to you; but to me it appears that

death would be preferable. Darling, how can you talk so quietly and calmly of our never meeting again ?

‘I must : there is no alternative. If you were not married, it might be different. Then I should have no one to think of but you and myself ; but now you have Edith and your children, and your first duty is to them.’

‘I know, I know,’ groaned Ronald ; ‘but it looks so black. It is like a deep night coming on—a night of cold and chills with no dawn to look forward to. I am tempted to curse my wife, and those who made me marry her.’

‘Hush, hush !’ said Alma, placing her hand on his mouth. ‘It was perhaps all for the best, though we blind mortals cannot see it. Edith is truly lovable. Can you not try and love her ? I should not be jealous,’ she added with a sad smile.

‘You know I have tried for years, and cannot,’ he answered.

‘You must try again; and as you get older, you will gradually find out that so clever and good a creature deserves far more love than I do.’

‘She deserves every happiness,’ said he. ‘I know she deserves a better husband than I am. But, with all that, I would sooner live with you, darling, in a cottage, and break stones all day, knowing that I should meet your sweet face in the evening, than dwell with her in the comfort and luxury we possess.’

‘You are cruel to talk like that, Ronald. You know it is inevitable. It is impious to despair when your life should be so pleasant and easy, and you have so much for which to be thankful. Besides, it is unmanly.’

‘Unmanly?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Do you not think that *I* feel it quite as deeply? Oh, Ronald! you have a charming, amiable young wife. I have an old husband, whose faults I dare not even mention. You have two lovely children, and can look forward to their future, and watch over

them, and see them growing stronger and better daily. *I* have nothing to look forward to, except years of misery. Oh, Ronald ! you should console me instead of complaining.'

She burst into tears ; and, full of self-reproaches, Ronald endeavoured to soothe her anguish. It was long before her sobs ceased, for the pent-up grief was deep and violent. They felt the brake put on as they descended the steep hill into the *Via Carretina*. It was quite dark now, and the moon had not yet risen. Her head was resting on his bosom for the last time.

' You will take me down to the boat, Ronald ? ' she asked.

' Will it be waiting ? '

' Yes,' she answered. ' They know I have gone out for the afternoon. I said I would get out of the way of the packing and dragging things off. I have nothing more to do in the house.'

‘Where will the boat be?’ asked he.

‘At the steps below the Villa. It was to be there at seven, so that I should get on board for his lordship’s dinner. What time is it now?’

Ronald struck a match to look at his watch. It was already half-past.

‘I am very late,’ she said, ‘and I shall get a scolding. Never mind. It will be the last time that I am scolded for your sake, and it will not hurt me. Kiss me, Ronald, kiss me once more. It is the last kiss. Good-bye, sweetheart. God bless you.’

The brougham drew up at the steps. Ronald helped Alma out, and led her down through the garden of the Villa. They found the maid with wraps, and one of the gig’s crew, waiting under the portico.

‘Make haste,’ said Lady Redbourne to them. ‘I have been delayed. Is everything on board?’

‘Everything, my lady. The boat is waiting for you.’

Silently she took Ronald's arm, and walked down to the little quay. There was a long pressure of the hand as he helped her into the boat. Dr. Allen was sitting in the stern sheets. Ronald was glad that he had come, as he knew that he would check any gossip. There was another little boat—an empty one—also moored to the steps.

‘That is one of our boats, is it not?’ asked Alma, as she was sitting down.

‘Yes,’ replied the doctor. ‘The two Italians his lordship has taken as pilots have come ashore for something or other, and they don’t seem to have come back yet. No doubt they are having a spree with their friends. All ready, my lady?’

‘All ready,’ answered Alma, in a low voice.

Ronald stooped over the boat and once more clasped her hand, whispering:

‘God bless you. I shall never forget.’

Then the doctor cried

‘Shove off. Give way.’ And five oars plashed into the water simultaneously. The gig moved swiftly across the harbour, leaving a phosphorescent path as she clove the dark flood.

Ronald stood watching her till he could see her no more, and then he still peered into the darkness, trying to make her out.

At last he groaned, ‘It is all over!’ and slowly turned homewards through the now-deserted garden of the Villa Palmieri. He stopped for a few minutes looking at the house which had held all that was sweet and precious to him, but was now cold and inanimate in dead blackness. He tried to nerve himself for the future, and remembered, with mingled pain and pride, that she had shown more courage than he. He walked round the garden, his steps sounding strangely on the gravel, as if they disturbed the solitude of a grave. Then, with one last look across the dark harbour, he set his face for home, and walked

with swift strides along the narrow lane which would lead him to the Marina.

There were high walls on either side. The Villa Palmieri was on a promontory some distance below the wide road which formed the prolongation of the Marina. Standing under the portico of the Villa, with your back to the sea, the main road was on the left front, the steps leading to the Via Carretina on the right front, and the narrow lane, which was the shortest way to Portino, on the extreme left. It twisted about between the gardens and courtyards of villas and cottages, and was sparsely lighted at very long intervals. There was no traffic along this lane, for it led only from the town to the Villa Palmieri and a few neighbouring houses, whose tenants had mostly left on account of the approaching summer. To most of them there was a better access from the front. But the lane saved more than a quarter of a mile, and Ronald had always chosen it for this reason,

and because he was less likely to meet people who knew him, as it was all but impassable for carriages. He passed on with quick, long strides, endeavouring to regain equanimity by physical exertion. Suddenly, in one of the darkest turns, a man sprang forward and stopped him with the well-known Portinese form of petition :

‘Carità, signore, per l’ amor di Dio e della Santissima Vergine.’

Ronald pushed on impatiently, but the man clung round his knees, repeating the words in an urgent, whining voice. He stopped, and put his hand in his pocket for some small coin. At that moment he felt a terrible pain from behind—a violent pain which shot right through his body. He threw up his hands with a yell. Then everything seemed to turn before his eyes, he staggered on for a pace or two, seeking support, which he failed to find, and then fell weltering in his blood.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE CRUISE OF THE 'LAODICEA.'

No inquiries were made by Lord Redbourne, and no complaint about his wife's late arrival on board. His lordship's good temper seemed to continue. At eight o'clock they were dining comfortably in the deck cabin, which adjoined Lord Redbourne's own state room. He could not have climbed up and down the companion, and had, therefore, reserved the deck-house for his own use. Dinner was about half over when the quartermaster knocked at the door, and the valet brought a message to his lordship.

'The Italian pilots have come on board, my lord. The captain wished me to tell you.'

'All right,' said Lord Redbourne, a cynical smile

lighting up his wrinkled face. 'I will see them by-and-by in my cabin. Tell Captain Osborne to stand by for getting under weigh.'

The man touched his cap and disappeared.

Alma was surprised at the sailing orders given, but, after all, what did it matter to her? She would spend the night weeping in her berth, whether in harbour or at sea. So she raised no objection, but merely asked Lord Redbourne whether they were going to start at once.

'I think so,' he answered. 'I believe we have completed all our business at Portino. You have all you want, Allen?'

'Yes, my lord,' replied the doctor.

'I know that the steward has,' continued Lord Redbourne, 'and the cook. I was careful to see to that myself. Osborne is burning to get away. Have you finished *your* business, Alma?'

There was a certain peculiar intonation about the

question which made Alma blush violently, she knew not why, but she answered indifferently :

‘ Oh, yes.’

‘ And I think *my* business is done—I *think* so,’ said his lordship. ‘ I am not quite sure, but I shall soon know. So there is nothing to keep us here, is there ?’

‘ I suppose not,’ assented Lady Redbourne.

‘ Very well, then. I am glad we are all agreed. We shall be quite a happy family now. What a pity,’ he added after a short pause, fixing his grey eyes on his wife, ‘ that our mutual friend, young Lascelles, is not with us !’

‘ A great pity,’ said Allen, very cordially, and without the slightest suspicion of any evil.

‘ We might have asked him to join us just for the cruise, you know,’ Lord Redbourne went on. ‘ He could have gone back from Gib. or somewhere.’

Alma was shivering in a cold perspiration. She

knew her husband too well to suppose that he meant only what his mere words conveyed.

‘There is plenty of time still,’ suggested Allen, good-naturedly; ‘we are not under weigh yet, and we could send the dinghy ashore and ask him.’

‘I am afraid,’ said Lord Redbourne, slowly but with marked emphasis, and still looking at his wife. ‘I am afraid that it is too late—just too late.’

Dinner was over. His lordship retired into his cabin and sent for the Portinese pilots, who at once appeared. Since we last saw them in the Villa Palmieri, their dress had much improved. They now wore decent jerseys and navy-blue trousers; and, but for their villanous faces and ragged hair, might almost have been taken for real seamen.

Lord Redbourne glanced round the cabin sharply to see whether the blinds were drawn down. Then he said in Italian:

‘Open the door, one of you.’

The man obeyed.

‘Quartermaster!’ cried his lordship, who kept his yacht as near man-of-war fashion as he could.

‘My lord,’ answered the man, approaching the door.

‘Anyone on the quarter-deck?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Keep it clear, then. I don’t want to be disturbed at present. Stand by the companion, and don’t let anyone come aft.’

‘Don’t let anyone come aft; aye, aye, my lord.’

‘Now,’ he said, turning to the two men as soon as the door was shut, and the steps of the retreating quartermaster had ceased to sound, ‘have you finished it?’

‘We have, Eccellenza,’ replied the smooth-faced one.

‘Where are your proofs?’

'*Ecco, Eccellenza,*' answered the man, producing a pocket-book which he handed to his lordship.

'Fie, you pig!' exclaimed Lord Redbourne, as he took the book from him. 'Why did you not wipe it first? Why it is filthy—all over slime.'

And Lord Redbourne looked with disgust at his hands, which were smeared with some reddish-brown stuff. It was not sea-water, nor slime, nor mud: it was blood.

The man was profuse in apologies.

'Hold your d—d row,' exclaimed his lordship, 'and bring me that basin and some water.'

He carefully washed his hands, and wiped the book, placing the towel on the table, for fear of forgetting it.

Then he proceeded to open the pocket-book. He found in it a number of visiting-cards bearing Ronald Lascelles' name, and memoranda papers of no importance. But there was nothing of any value.

‘Where are the bank-notes?’ inquired Lord Redbourne sharply.

‘There were none in it,’ replied the men simultaneously.

‘You lie, you fools!’ his lordship went on. ‘Don’t you know that he was a banker, and was taking his *inamorata* out into the country? Of course he had bank-notes. You have kept them.’

‘By Heaven we have not,’ they said.

‘Liars,’ repeated Lord Redbourne, ‘and idiots. He was a banker, and you may be sure that he kept the numbers of the notes. Every one of them will be evidence against you. It will be traced, as sure as there is a police in Portino, and then—*felice notte*.’ He made a significant gesture as if a cord were being knotted round his neck. The rascals began to look alarmed.

‘Do you think I want the money?’ his lordship went on. ‘Look round the ship. It is all mine, and I’ve enough to buy twenty such ships.’

The black, beady eyes of the bearded one almost started out of their sockets.

'You must hand me every one of the notes that was in this book,' said Lord Redbourne. 'You must not keep a single one back, or your necks will pay for it. And I will give you good gold napoleons—napoleons which tell no tales.'

'Well, Eccellenza,' said the bearded man, 'we did find some money. We ought not to have deceived you, Eccellenza; but it was a trifle.'

'No more words. Hand it over at once.'

The men proceeded to pull up their jerseys to the arms, and disclosed two tattered shirts, dirtier than words can describe. Under the shirts, suspended by a leather thong round the neck, each wore a small bag of the same material, and a tiny silver crucifix. They opened their bags and produced notes of various denominations, amounting in all to about four hundred francs.

‘*Per Bacco!*’ exclaimed his lordship, ‘you have made some progress since last week! You call this a trifle? Now have you given me every bank-note you found?’

‘Every one,’ they said.

‘Swear it on the crucifix, then.’

The bearded one raised the little cross to his lips with the left hand, while lifting up the right towards Heaven, and swore solemnly. But his comrade hesitated.

‘Well?’ said Lord Redbourne impatiently. ‘And you?’

The man almost blushed through his swarthy skin, and stammered, and at last he took off his boot, whence he produced a bank-note for five hundred francs.

‘Rascal!’ exclaimed his lordship. ‘It is well that you have brought it out. This would have been a capital passport to the gallows, even after ten years.’

'It was my share,' pleaded the bravo. '*I* did the trick.'

And then he swore willingly enough, appealing to Heaven to punish him if he were telling a falsehood.

'Now light that candle,' said Lord Redbourne.

It was done, and placed on the little table beside him. He burnt the bank-notes carefully, one by one, till nothing remained of them but black ashes. The Italians stared in amazement at this waste of good money.

'Where is his watch?' asked he, when the task was completed.

There was more prevarication, but at last the bearded man produced the watch from his boot, and the other one the chain from under his belt.

Then his lordship unlocked a heavy iron safe behind his chair, and took out of it a bag of napoleons.

'Here,' he said, counting them out, 'are twenty-

five napoleons each for the bank-notes you have given me. Here are ten more each for the watch and chain. And, lastly, here are the fifty I promised you. Share them as you like.'

The Italians were profuse in their gratitude. The younger, however, ventured to ask :

'How about the other hundred, Eccellenza ?'

'Those you shall have, as I said, the day you sail for South America—when you are safe on board the ship. Now, where is the dagger ?'

'Here, Eccellenza,' said the beardless one, producing a long, double-edged knife, sharp as a razor.

'Very well. Give me that towel.'

His lordship slowly spread out the blood-stained towel, and placed in it the pocket-book and the watch and chain. Then he made them bring him a bag of shot from a locker, and knotted the towel carefully, so that none of the articles could possibly slip out. Lastly, he pushed the sharp knife through it, so that

if perchance the knots became undone, the knife would still skewer the cloth together. All this being completed, he told one of them to open the door, and the other to hold out his arm. Grasping it firmly with one hand, he took up the fatal bundle in the other, and struggled across the deck to the bulwarks. Then he dropped the bundle overboard. It sank to the bottom instantly.

When he had returned to his cabin with the assistance of his humble instruments, he dismissed them. Then he rang the bell for his valet, and in a half an hour the *Laodicea* was steaming slowly round the Molo, bound for Palermo.

Just when the lighthouse-keeper at the head of the Molo could scarcely make out the glare of the fire from the *Laodicea's* funnel, and the throb of her screw was becoming fainter in the distance, Edith surprised Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles by suddenly appearing in the quiet drawing-room at the Consulate.

‘Edith!’ exclaimed her father-in-law, in astonishment.

‘Why, child, what is the matter?’ asked Mrs. Lascelles, rising from her arm-chair. ‘You look as pale as death!’

‘Have you seen Ronald?’ she gasped.

‘Ronald? No, of course not. We thought he was quietly at home hours ago. Did he not come in to dinner?’

‘No!’ she cried. ‘O God! I do not know what has become of him!’

Mrs. Lascelles was a sensible woman withal, and not easily alarmed for a trifle. She led her daughter-in-law to a seat.

‘Calm yourself, dear. He is probably dining out somewhere. There is nothing to be frightened at.’

‘I cannot help it!’ gasped Edith, trembling. ‘O mother, mother, he will never come back!’

‘Do not talk nonsense, Edith,’ said Mrs. Lascelles,

almost sharply. 'He may have gone to the club, or to a friend's house.'

'No, no,' she answered. 'I have sent to the club, and I have inquired everywhere. O Ronald!' she cried, unable to control herself, 'why did you leave me?' Then, in another minute, she burst into hysterical laughter. 'Of course,' she said, 'how could it be otherwise? Why should I cry for him? He did not care for me; he never did!'

Mrs. Lascelles was now seriously frightened. She sent her husband for Marietta, and coaxed Edith to come into her room. When the poor thing began to recover her senses, she again burst into tears and sobbed violently.

'Do not be so anxious, Edith dear,' said Mrs. Lascelles soothingly. 'Ronald will be at home soon, and laugh at your fears.'

'You don't understand it!' cried Edith. 'Oh, he will never come back! I know he will not.'

‘What makes you so unreasonable, child?’ asked Mrs. Lascelles. ‘I cannot make you out. Surely there is nothing so very strange in his not having returned to dinner?’

In her terror, Edith threw her arms round the old lady’s neck and drew her head down.

‘Listen,’ she whispered. ‘I know what has happened. He has gone off with her!’

‘With whom? Are you mad, child? What do you mean?’

‘With Lady Redbourne! I have known it ever so long. He has loved her for years, long before he knew poor me. And now he has left us all, and has gone off with her at last!’

Then she burst into tears again, and sobbed as if her heart would break. Nothing Mrs. Lascelles could say or do had any effect on her uncontrollable grief. Between her paroxysms she sobbed out the whole story—how he had met Lady Redbourne at Rich-

mond, how she had generously helped them in their hour of need, how he had raved about her in his fever, and how they had once more renewed their acquaintance at Portino. His mother was horrified, almost turned to stone, when she heard the tale. Yet she attributed some of it to Edith's fancy. She could not believe it.

'But,' said Mrs. Lascelles at last, 'from what you tell me, and from what I have seen of Lady Redbourne, she is not at all the sort of woman to elope with a married man. She has a generous, high-principled nature, I should think.'

'You don't know what love is,' replied Edith. 'You have no idea of its power. There is nothing in this world nor the next that can resist it.'

'Nonsense, Edith. You are raving. Ronald would never desert his wife and children for any woman in the world.'

'Mother,' said Edith, checking her sobs and sitting

up on the bed, 'you don't know. If that woman had told Ronald to jump into the sea to pick up a shilling, he would have done it.'

Edith was right. The good Consul's wife had no knowledge of love in its more violent forms. She could understand domestic affection, and she understood the infatuation of some foolish young men for ladies of various ages and very various positions in society.

Such attacks were like the diseases of infancy—difficult to avoid, but not very serious if carefully treated. If neglected, of course they might be dangerous; but generally they were short, sharp, and without permanent evil results. But that a married man, with a perfect wife and two lovely children—her own clever, good son—should be thus seized was to her simply an impossibility. She did not believe it because she thought that in the nature of things it could not be.

'My dear Edith,' said she, after arguing the matter as well as she could, 'have you anything to confirm this mad idea of yours?'

'Everything!' said Edith. 'I asked where he had spent the afternoon. They would not tell me at first; but at last I found out that he had driven to Bagnuoli with her in his brougham. Then he went into the Villa with her, and no one has seen him since. Oh!' she cried, again bursting into tears, 'and no one of us will ever see him again.'

'But have you inquired at the Villa?'

'Of course!' she replied. 'There is no one there at all. It is empty and locked up. Lord Redbourne left for the yacht before lunch. I can see clearly how it was all arranged. They went off to the station while the yacht was waiting for them!'

'Is the yacht still here?' asked Mrs. Lascelles, very sensibly.

'I do not know,' said Edith.

‘Your father would know. I will go at once and inquire.

Of course at the Consulate the movements of a large English steamer were sure to be known. In ten minutes Mrs. Lascelles ascertained that the *Laodicea* had cleared for Palermo that afternoon, and had been seen steaming out of the harbour about an hour before. She returned to Edith with the news.

‘Now, dear,’ she said, ‘you see you must be wrong. Lord Redbourne would not have sailed off without his wife.’

‘Who knows? Perhaps he was glad to get rid of her. Perhaps it was all arranged between them.’

‘You are unreasonable, Edith. I will go home with you now. We are sure to find Ronald waiting for you, and wondering what you are doing away from home at eleven o’clock at night.’

At the Palazzo Woodall they found, to their surprise, the door wide open and a commotion in the

hall. There was a noise of loud talking and exclamations, of questions and answers, which was suddenly hushed when one of the servants cried :

‘*La Signora !*’

‘What is the matter ?’ asked Edith.

There was no reply. Some averted their eyes ; others looked down on the floor. No one spoke.

‘What is it ?’ she asked again. ‘Where is the Signore ?’

The old concierge pointed up the staircase.

‘Upstairs ? Why did you not tell me ? What is it ? Is he hurt ?’ and she turned to run up as fast as she could.

‘Wait, Signora,’ said one of the women. ‘They have carried him into his room. The doctor has come.’

‘What has happened ?’ screamed Edith. ‘Speak, for Heaven’s sake, or stand back and let me go upstairs.’

Still there was silence, and the staircase was blocked.

‘Dead?’

There was no answer. The faces only grew paler, and the eyes sought the ground again. But she read the truth, nevertheless.

Throwing her arms up with one piercing shriek, she fell prone on the marble pavement.

At this moment, George Stent calmly lighted a cigar as he issued out of the Caffè Florian at Venice, and wondered whether the mine he had left behind had exploded.

He need not have doubted it.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

AND LAST.

WHEN the *Laodicea* had been at sea about twelve hours, Lord Redbourne woke from the calm and untroubled slumber which accompanies a good conscience. Sending for his captain, he ordered the course to be altered, and shaped straight for Gibraltar.

‘After all,’ he said, ‘I have changed my mind about these Lipari Islands. We will sail home as fast as we can, and get rid of these Portino fellows when we fall in with an Italian ship.’

‘Very well, my lord,’ said Osborne, to whom the order was very welcome, and who was anxious to get

rid of the dirty native rascals, as he not inaptly termed them, as soon as possible.

Lord Redbourne was in excellent spirits all day, and particularly amiable to his wife. At dinner he insisted on drinking champagne, though Dr. Allen warned him that that insidious wine was sure to bring on the gout. He laughed good-humouredly at the doctor, instead of swearing at him, as he would have done a week ago. But he insisted on having his way, and forced a glass on Alma, who felt disposed for anything rather than champagne. As to Allen, he admitted that he liked it himself, and that it agreed with him; but he begged his patient not to take more than one glass. All was useless; not only did Lord Redbourne indulge freely, but he even ordered a second bottle to be opened. Then the honour of the physician asserted itself.

‘I cannot sit by and see you killing yourself, my lord,’ said Allen, and rising from the table. ‘You

must excuse my leaving your table.' And he rose as majestically as he could—not very majestically, for there was a little lop on—and retired to his own cabin.

'Go and be d—d to you, Pillbox,' Lord Redbourne called after him. And then he actually turned to Alma, and apologized for having used an oath in her presence.

Considering that he had sworn freely and unceasingly for years, whether in his wife's hearing or not, this conduct was certainly surprising. Alma began to wonder whether she had done him injustice, and whether, after all, he was perhaps better than she thought, or at any rate disposed to become better in his declining years. She repressed her sighs and tried to be cheerful. She thought it her duty to encourage any signs of good feeling displayed by her husband, and therefore sat patiently by while he discussed a bottle of old madeira, which, in the absence of his

doctor, he ordered up to conclude the feast. The old man lay back in his chair, holding up his wine to the light and admiring its golden sparkle. Occasionally, he would gently stroke his wife's cheek with his left hand. Once he even went so far as to bend over her and impress on her face a horrible vinous kiss. She shuddered, but bore it calmly. When he had finished his wine he called for coffee and cigarettes, and still kept his wife by his side.

‘I want you to stop with me a bit, Alma,’ he said caressingly. ‘I wish we had asked that young Lascelles to come : he would have been better company than Allen, and I should not worry you by keeping you here.’

‘Oh, I don't mind at all,’ murmured she.

‘Yes, but you do. I am not blind — not quite blind *yet*,’ he said, as he had said in the Villa Palmieri. ‘You would like your old husband to be at the bottom of the sea.’

‘How can you say such things, Redbourne?’

‘Because they are all true, my dear,’ he answered, stroking her cheek. ‘I know, bless you, child, I am old enough to be your grandfather! Of course you cannot love me; I never expected it. When I am gone, you will marry some fine strapping young fellow of your own age.’

‘I shall not want to marry again,’ said Alma sadly.

‘You will want to, fast enough, if you find the right man. A pity that young Lascelles is married already; he would have suited you exactly, would he not?’

The old man looked piercingly at her. She was suffering agonies.

‘It is too late, though, now. It’s no use crying over spilt milk. Good-night, child; go to bed.’

What did all this mean? Was the old man really inclined to be fonder and good to her during the rest of his life? But then, why these constant allusions to Ronald, and the frequent sharp glances of those

keen eyes? She retired to rest in a state of bewilderment. For many hours she tossed about sleeplessly on her couch. Towards morning she dropped into an uneasy slumber, only to be awakened by the tramping on deck overhead and voices in the steerage.

She wondered whether anything had happened to the vessel. But soon there was a knock at her door, and her maid's voice inquired whether she might come in.

‘His lordship is took very ill, my lady, and the doctor said as how I'd best call you up.’

In a few minutes she was on deck in the dim dawn of morning, in the cabin adjoining Lord Redbourne's. Allen came out with an anxious face.

‘It is as I feared, Lady Redbourne,’ he said. ‘That wine last night settled it. *Angina pectoris* has come on. I do not think there is any chance for him.’

‘Is he in great pain?’ asked Alma, full of deep

sorrow, notwithstanding all she had suffered from the man who was now on his death-bed.

‘Well, he can scarcely breathe ; but there is not much actual pain at this moment. He was in agonies for several hours—ever since midnight, in fact. But it was of no use waking you then. Now I think you had better go in to him.’

‘Does he know, then?’ whispered Alma, struck with awe.

‘I felt it my duty to tell him,’ replied Allen, ‘and he asked for you.’

She followed the doctor into the cabin, where the wreck of her husband was propped up with pillows on the couch. He had been seized with frightful pain before he had got into his berth, and they had not dared to move him since. His breath came and went in short, hoarse gasps.

‘Who is it?’ he asked in a faint voice.

‘Go away, doctor,’ he struggled to say, when he

heard the reply. 'I wish—to speak—to Lady Redbourne in private.

Allen obeyed.

'Alma,' said the old man hoarsely, 'I am going to die.'

She only wept. What other answer could she give?

'I am perfectly aware of it—I cannot breathe. Please lift up my head. Thank you,' he gasped as she obeyed. 'In an hour or two it will be—all over.'

Alma was still silent. There was nothing to be heard except the old man's moaning and an occasional sob. She had not done her entire duty to the wretched creature who was lying there—and she felt it.

'Do you think that I am in my senses?' asked the invalid. 'Do you think that I know what I am talking about?'

‘Of course you do,’ whispered Alma. ‘But do not try to speak ; it hurts you too much.’

‘I must, or it will be too late.’

The words came out slower, with frequent interruptions by dreadful fits of coughing.

‘I have had, on the whole, a jolly life of it. I cannot complain. I have spent more happy hours than most men. I have taken things easily, and have treated people as I found them—good or bad. My temper has been sharp lately ; but it has been that infernal gout.’

He paused, exhausted. There was a violent struggle for breath, and Alma almost feared that he would never speak again. She turned to the door to call for help, but Lord Redbourne made violent signs for her to sit down again by his side.

‘Give me some of that drink,’ he at last said : ‘I am as weak as a baby. Thanks. I have done some things I am sorry for in the course of my life, but some I am proud of. And the thing I am proudest

of I am going to tell you. It has been a neat workmanlike job.'

Alma listened attentively.

Lord Redbourne succeeded in sitting almost erect.

'Open the window,' he cried; 'I want air.' At last he went on, still with frequent interruptions. 'The Redbournes are a proud lot,' he went on; 'my father was a fine fellow—but proud. We have all been proud for generations. When some one injures us, we do not go to law, but pitch into him. In old times we used to run him through; now, in England, we have to be satisfied with punching his head. No Redbourne has ever been in the Divorce Court.'

Alma started. A fearful gurgling in the sick man's throat. She sprang to her feet, and shrieked for the doctor.

'Be quiet,' Lord Redbourne said hoarsely; and then in a weak, failing voice, went on: 'I was not going to be the first. Did you fancy I knew nothing of

Ronald Lascelles and your spooning? Why, you were not ashamed of being seen all about Portino with him, and dancing with him all night, and then going off to some village to spend a happy afternoon! *You* were not ashamed, but *I* was.'

Alma was dumabfounded. She could not utter a syllable. Now she stooped to catch the faint whisper of his words.

'It would have been a pity to kill you. You are too handsome and too young to die. Besides, perhaps it was not your fault; and it might have created a scandal. So I thought I had better get him killed instead.'

'Kill him!' shrieked Alma.

'Yes,' he answered, in a very weak but determined voice. 'The young gentleman had a knife put into his heart within five minutes of leaving you, the night before last. He won't seduce anyone else's wife, I can assure you.'

‘He was innocent! Upon my soul, innocent! So am I!’ cried Alma, falling on her knees. ‘And you have taken the life of an innocent man.’

‘Don’t make a noise,’ gasped the dying man, while a ghastly livid pallor overspread his face; ‘it is not good form. At any rate, the young man is done for, and you won’t be able to marry him. I shall die with a good conscience!’

A quarter of an hour later Allen ventured to enter the cabin, whence no sound had issued for some time. He found Lady Redbourne inanimate on the floor, and his lordship fighting for breath, his arms stretched and his fingers spread out, grasping convulsively for the life which was fast ebbing away.

Two days later the *Laodicea* entered Gibraltar with her flag half-mast high. The owner was on board—dead.

* * * * *

‘There is just the slightest shadow of hope,’ said

Dr. Guarani to the Consul, after watching all night at the bedside. ‘The hæmorrhage was terrible; and when I first examined him, I thought he was actually gone. But this mirror has always shown a faint dulness when I held it to his face, and by a very careful touch I can just detect a pulse—I may say the ghost of a pulse.’

‘Thank God!’ exclaimed the Consul.

‘Do not be in a hurry, and, above all, do not rush and wake the ladies. They want rest badly enough, poor things. He may yet go out at any moment. In fact, to tell you the truth, I think he’s pretty sure to go out. But he is still living; and where there is life there is hope. The hæmorrhage has stopped, and fortunately that knife glanced off and did not penetrate the heart, but only grazed the outer integuments.’

Edith had not slept. When she recovered from her trance she found herself in her own room, and slowly realised the horrors of the night. Her first feeling was almost one of relief. Her husband had not

deserted her, but had been murdered on his way home—foully and cruelly murdered. Better that he should be dead than living with another! But then she reproached herself for this awful joy, and fell to weeping over her widowed home and fatherless children. Hearing her sobs, Marietta came in from the adjoining room and tried consolation.

‘Trust in the Holy Virgin!’ said the poor old woman. ‘The Cavaliere may yet recover by a miracle.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Edith starting up. ‘Is it not all over, then?’

Her cry brought Mrs. Lascelles in.

‘No, dear, thanks be to Heaven! There is just a faint chance of Ronald being saved to us. It seems that Dr. Guarani exclaimed that it was all over when he first examined the poor fellow, and of course the servants took up the cry, and made up their minds to the worst, as servants always do,’ she added with a faint smile.

Long before she had finished Edith was up. She had thrown a shawl over her shoulders.

‘I must go to him,’ she said. ‘My place is by my husband’s side. Thank God that I still possess a husband!’

Indeed, it was time that somebody should relieve the doctor, who was nearly worn out by the exertion of five consecutive hours. The dawn was creeping through the windows when Edith entered the sick-room. Without any signs of emotion she asked what was to be done and how to do it. Guarani promised to send his assistant immediately, and to return in a couple of hours himself. He instructed her as to the use of restoratives, and then darted off to send his junior.

For days Ronald floated, hesitating between life and death. At any moment a slight shock, a disturbance of the bandages, or even a violent noise, might have inclined the balance against him. But a strong con-

stitution, the most careful of doctors, and the most devoted of nurses at last conquered. He was pronounced to be out of immediate danger, and his ultimate recovery would depend, they said, on his being kept absolutely quiet, and still nursed with the greatest attention.

But to the Consul, and to his mother, the doctors confided what at first they did not dare to tell Edith—that he would never regain his old strength. One lung had been touched by the knife, and at the best that lung must always be weak and liable to inflammation. So many organs had been injured that the whilom strong man would be little better than a valetudinarian. Desk-work would be out of the question for him: out-door exercise must be confined to quiet drives and gentle walks. A cold climate would be fatal; fogs and frost deadly. Gradually the sad truth was told to Edith, and she, with many precautions, broke it to the invalid when the summer heats were

over and the people were returning to Portino, and Ronald began to talk of resuming his place at the Bank. Alas ! it had long ago been filled up by young Woodall, who had been hastily summoned from Lombard Street, and Ronald Lascelles would never more study the exchanges, and dictate letters, and watch the faces of his cunning Italian customers when they wanted to get a loan from him.

The blow was terrible at first. But, lying on his couch, Ronald thought of his past life, its troubles and its passions, and he thanked Providence for having been merciful to him. He had been chastened, and even punished, but not beyond his deserts. He still had a long life before him—a life possibly not active nor vigorous as he might have desired, but one in which it was possible to do and enjoy much good. He had a loving wife and delightful children. He had more money than he wanted—more than was necessary to provide for everybody. He had been saved three

times almost miraculously—once from financial ruin and disgrace by a great, generous-hearted woman, once from moral ruin by the same noble creature, and now, by the mercy of Heaven and his good wife's care, from the knife of the assassin. His heart was still full of memories of Alma, but the passion was dead. It had gone with his blood when the dagger was plunged into his back on that fatal night. It had gone never to return, for the days and nights of weakness had taught him lessons of humility and patience—lessons which he would never forget. They had taught him, too, to think gently and lovingly of his good mother, whose despair at the possibility of losing her son had been described to him by Guarani as fearful to behold. After all she had not been so far wrong when she selected Edith as the proper wife for him. Could the second half of his life have been happier, even with his own adored Alma?

The latter wrote a terrible, painful letter of remorse

to Edith from Gibraltar, still under the fearful impression left by Lord Redbourne's dying words, and believing that poor Ronald had left this world for a better. In this letter Alma told more than she herself was aware. Utterly depraved as Lord Redbourne had been, his widow shrank from exposing the full extent of his wickedness even now. She said that she had had a terrible scene with her husband before he died ; that the latter had accused her of faithlessness, and had admitted that he himself had indirectly caused Ronald's death by allowing it to be known that he would pass through the solitary lane with a considerable sum of money on his person. The hint, added Alma, seemed to have sufficed for the Portino *bravos*. That every line in this letter was full of the most awful self-reproaches and the most abject remorse need scarcely be mentioned. It wound up by saying that among his lordship's papers an anonymous letter had been found, which was probably the original cause of his suspicion.

The whole story was now clear. The police, who had industriously been pursuing a 'clue,' and had caught nobody, was informed that as the motives of the attack had not been robbery, they would probably not succeed in capturing the villains. Nor did they. The two *bravos* were transferred at Gibraltar to a vessel bound for Buenos Ayres, where, perhaps, they lived happily ever after.

When the invalid's recovery appeared almost certain, Edith wrote to her at Redbourne House, and, some weeks later, received a reply which filled her with varied emotions. Lady Redbourne determined to devote her vast fortune and her great abilities to good works, and for this purpose had already started and endowed a Convalescent Home, and was next intending to construct a similar building at the sea-side, on a much larger scale, for the poor children of London. In connection with this institution, of which she proposed taking the active management herself,

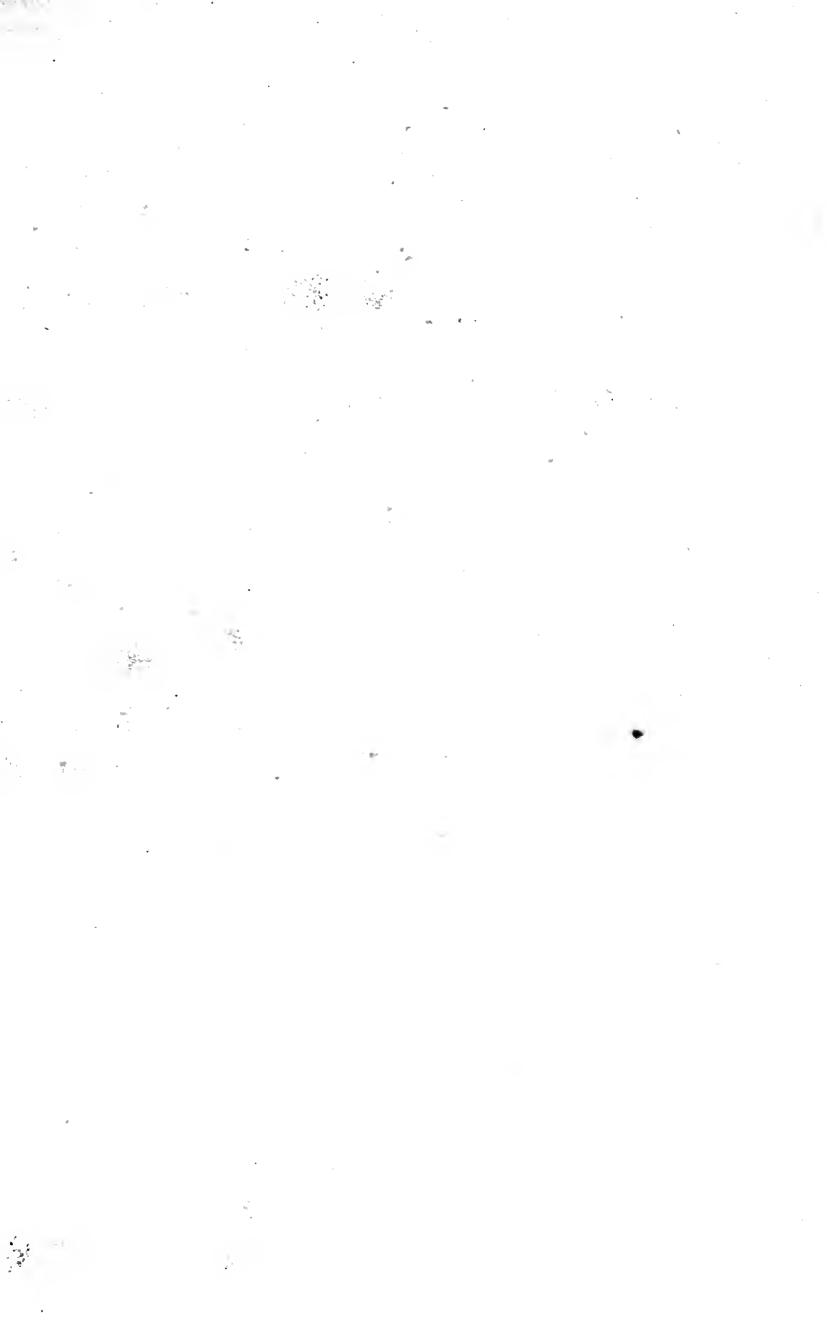
she thought of erecting a hundred cottages, where poor families might come for ten days or a fortnight during the summer to recruit their frames, worn out by incessant work in the stifling atmosphere of the East End. In her noble efforts she had secured the assistance of Mrs. Hardy, and both looked forward to their future with anticipations which were almost joyous.

George Stent became a disagreeable old man long before his time. Disappointed and disgusted at the failure of his schemes (which the clan greatly reprobated, because anonymous letters were not respectable), he plodded along in the old weary track without satisfaction in the present or hope for the future. Fortunately, Clara's quiet disposition made her contented with her lot, and she has not yet discovered what an entirely bad man she has married. The only thing that puzzles her is, that Edith and Ronald have never asked them to Portino, and never mention George's name in their rare and brief letters.

Woodalls' is still flourishing. Young Reginald Lascelles, Ronald's son, is to enter the establishment in Lombard Street next year. Mr. Edward Woodall, though eighty years of age, still receives his friends hospitably at Heath Lodge, and has three bottles of '34 port left, which he says shall be drunk on the day when Reginald becomes a partner. Edith's father drives to Lombard Street three times a week, and is hale and hearty. He goes to Portino every winter to see his children.

As to the Consul, he has retired ; but Ronald has bought the Villa Palmieri for him, and he and his wife spend their time between this, the Palazzo Donati, and Ronald's new home on the road to San Cristoforo.

THE END.







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